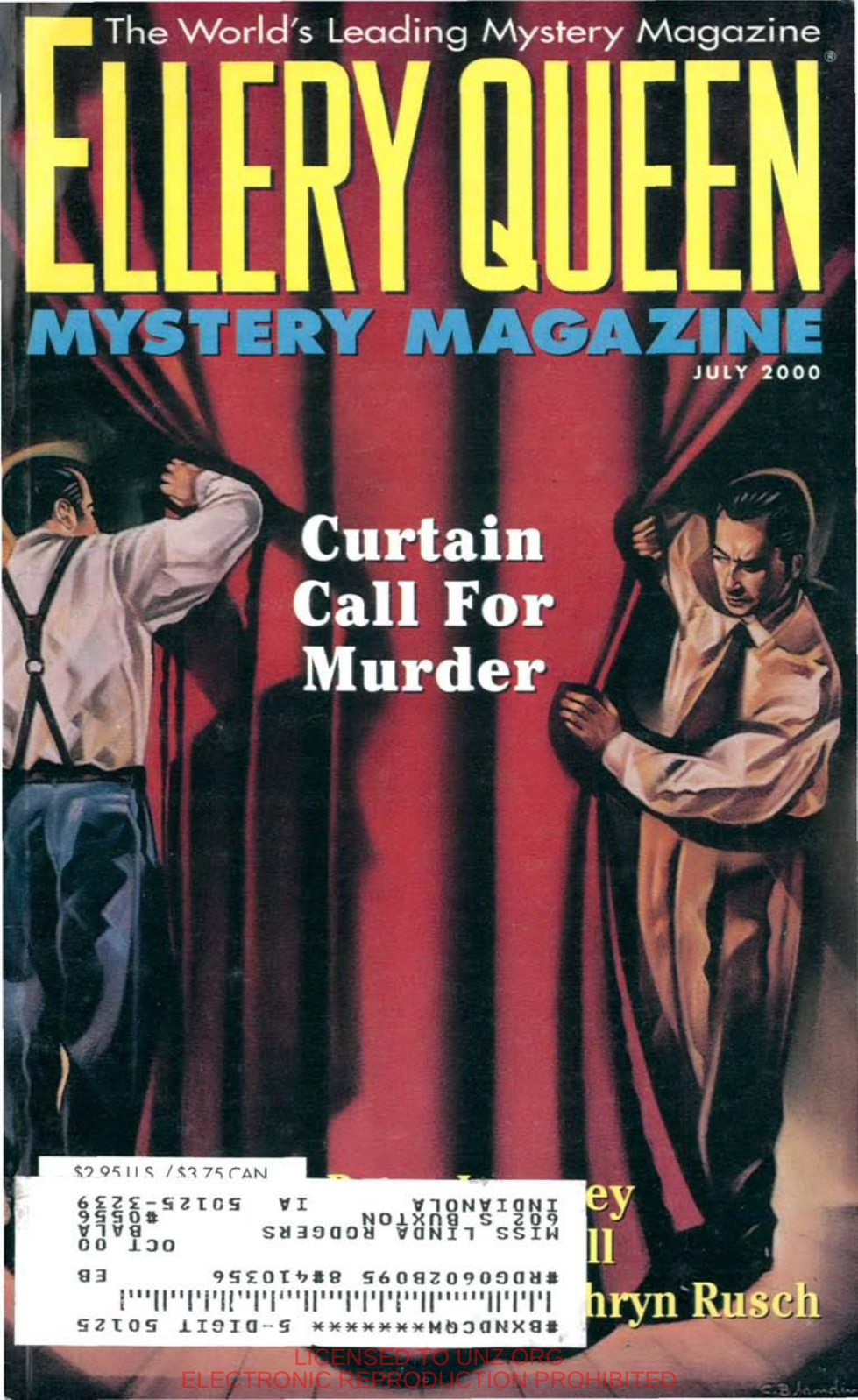

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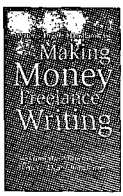

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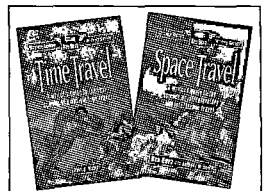

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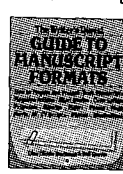

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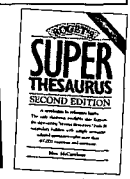

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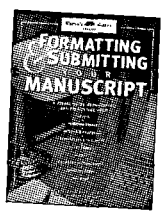

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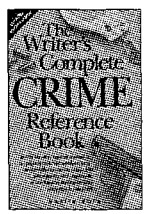

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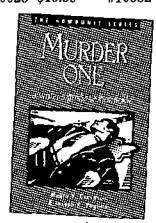

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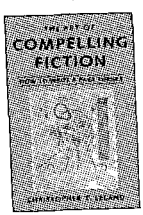

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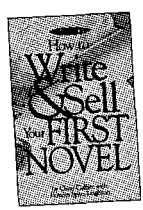

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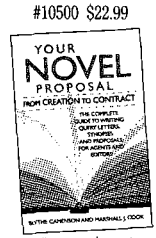

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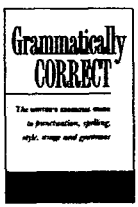

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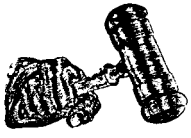

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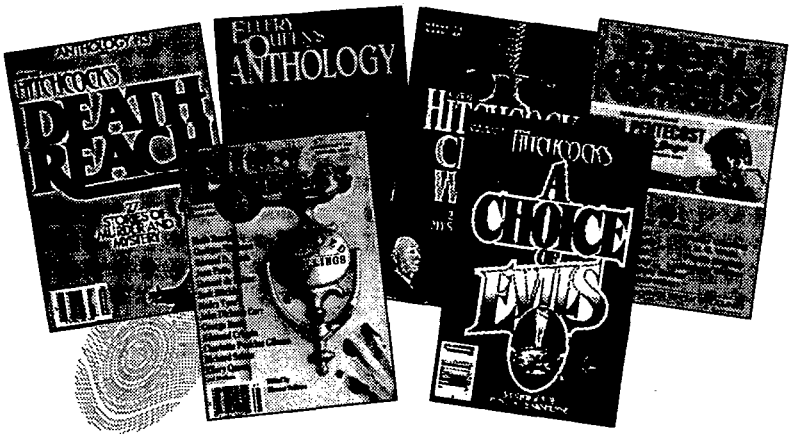

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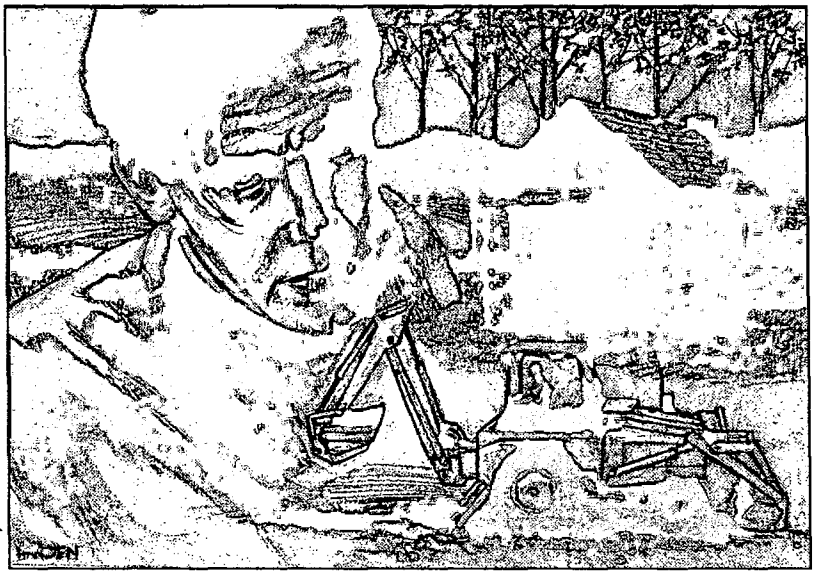

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SLAVE WALL

by Hal Charles

Thomas Wolfe was wrong, Daniel Wheelwright decided. It wasn't that you couldn't go home again—it was that you didn't really want to. Wheelwright slowed his forest-green Boxster as he approached the one-lane bridge that led over the Kentucky River. He recalled Uncle Willie saying the covered bridge had been built by the CCC in the Depression, back when old Judge Shadrach Estill had more power than FDR. Back then, the bridge had been the only entrance into Clement County and the only exit. Not that anybody other than he, and maybe his father, had ever wanted to leave.

At first, Wheelwright had wadded up the handwritten invitation to the tenth reunion of the Clement County High School class of '88 and heaved it into his study wastebasket. But repeatedly staring down into the leather-lined hole had forced him to consider the possibilities. It was the week after Labor Day, and most of the Litchfield Hills crowd had closed up their summer homes and summer lives to return to a cooled-down city. Finally, he had faced a more significant truth. His life was in worse shape than that

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crumpled invitation. Two divorces, three years without a book, and a cancelled cable talk show had left him in desperate need of funds and fame. In less than a decade he had slipped from his lofty perch as "rural wunderkind ironist" and authentic "Appalachian voice" to an occasional Op Ed column or page in an academic review that paid only in contributor's copies. Maybe he ought to return home, temporarily. It would be worth it just to see the country mice grovel at his Guccis. Even more, he needed inspiration. Hadn't Wordsworth gone back to Tintern Abbey in search of local color for his poetry? Yes, even as the log bridge creaked beneath him, Wheelwright was happy he had once again come unto these hills.

"If there were eight million stories in the Naked City," say Kentucky writers Hal Blythe and Charlie Sweet, who together pen the Hal Charles stories for *EQMM*, "there are at least as many in our little corner of Appalachia." Mr. Blythe and Mr. Sweet have been mining those Eastern Kentucky tales for *EQMM* since 1978. Over that period they've also written three books, and numerous short stories for other publications. ¶

But then Wheelwright's head started pitching and yawing. He felt he was swaying . . . colors swirling around him as though he were inside a kaleidoscope . . . voices splashing over him . . . a harsh adult commanding him to go back home . . . him responding that he didn't want to be left alone . . . metal ripping his left cheek . . . an explosion . . . he was sprawling . . . falling . . . calling out for someone . . . the water rushing up to catch him . . .

Wheelwright braked to a halt. His tires gripped the late-afternoon cracked asphalt. He exhaled slowly. Only then did he realize he had been holding his breath the entire crossing. Perhaps he had simply gotten lightheaded. He asked himself a simple question he couldn't answer: Why hadn't he used the newer steel bridge five miles down the road?

Wheelwright extracted himself from the top-down sports car and stretched the tight muscles in his legs. What had he just experienced? Something between a flashback and vertigo. The mountain air felt damp and clean and cool. A sudden chatter of birds to his right told him a red hawk was probably riding the thermals overhead. The walnut trees were almost devoid of leaves. "Last to get 'em—first to lose 'em," his Uncle Willie had "learnt" him long ago.

Down below, the limestone ledges where once the Divine Holiness Church had sacked rattlesnakes for their sacred ceremonies

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were littered with old tires, twisted cans, Styrofoam cups, and rusted major appliances. None of that debris had been there when a flock of gawky kids had swung out over the river, suspended themselves forever between the solid ground and cool water, then let go. Wheelwright climbed back into the security of his German-engineered driving machine, wondering what had happened to the congregation of environmental do-gooders who used to make annual down payments on heaven with their philanthropic clean-ups.

The home he had grown up in looked unchanged. Surrounded by honey-locust posts and rusted barbed wire, the hand-hewn logs and white chinking had been in the family for years. A memory of childhood descended on him in dark patches like a swarm of bees. Sent to get some potatoes from the always-damp cellar, he had noticed some iron rings anchored into the wall and asked his mother what they were for. "Slaves," she said unemotionally. "The rowdy males slept down there chained so's they wouldn't run away at night."

Rounding the corner, he spotted an unfamiliar red pickup beside the black Ford that had once belonged to his father before he had walked into the summer night never to return. Should he knock? He hadn't called ahead because, by his father's decree, the house would never have a telephone. His mama, dropping a white-eyed potato in boiling water, had explained to him after his father's departure that there was still no need, for "He ain't never gonna call us anyway." Who was his mother's company in the pickup? Had his father actually returned?

With great anticipation, Wheelwright hurried across the rotting pine porch. Somewhere in the distance he thought he heard the whine of heavy machinery. Lifting the black latch on the door, he walked in. The odor of cigarettes permeated the room like death at a funeral parlor. His mother, who had looked old when she was young, turned as he came in. "Hi," he said sheepishly.

"The prodigal returns," she said without a hint of emotion. She paused in slicing tomatoes to take a drag from a cigarette, then exhale with a deep cough.

A fortyish man in a sleeveless white T-shirt that the kids in New York called "wife-beaters" stood up and wiped his hands on gray-covered jeans. Each of his finger joints was wrapped in white adhesive tape, and his coarse hands seemed dried up. His face was camouflaged by a week's growth of beard.

"Didn't know you had visitors," Wheelwright apologized.

"My son," she explained to the now-standing figure, then turned to Wheelwright with a dry hack. "And Jack ain't no visitor. He lives here with me."

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The man called Jack gripped Wheelwright's offered hand. "Rebecca doesn't talk much about you," he said, then turned to the woman. "Like I was sayin', Barry's so drunk from workin' as a bouncer last night, he falls off the chimney."

"Hurt himself?" she said as though Wheelwright were nothing more than an evening shadow.

"Broke his arm, but the boy's too tanked to know. Wilma come to fetch him and took him 'cross the river to the doctor. Bet he'll be back tomorrow. They need the money." He pulled a Budweiser bottle out of the refrigerator. "Got to go find the dogs. Shoulda been home by now."

Wheelwright sat in the unlit room looking down at the uneven, unfinished floorboards as his mother suffered another coughing spasm. On the cherry end table his father had made sat a black telephone. After a while Wheelwright said, "Well, something's changed around here."

"Sure did," she said, sliding the tomato slices onto pieces of bread. "Got me a man who got no trouble finding his way home at night."

"He's a mason," Wheelwright said, trying to show he still knew his way around.

"Don't let Jack hear you say that. Calls himself a 'rocker.' Even got a card saying he's a 'rock artist.' Gives that out to folks he works for."

Wheelwright found himself making mental notes of what she was telling him. It was the kind of detail *The New Yorker* used to like him to throw into his pieces. Then he began to feel guilty. This was his mother, a woman he hadn't seen in ten years. He was using her and starting to judge her lifestyle as though she were one of his creations. "So Daddy never came back?" he tried.

"You've got some nerve asking me that." Her tone reminded him of how she used to scold the old hunting hounds, Salt and Pepper.

"And you never even heard from him?" He remembered how his father had gone off on drinking binges for days, even weeks. Once, in the midst of the coldest winter he could recall, his Uncle Willie had driven to Beckley, West Virginia, to fetch the old man home.

"I bet he never contacted you neither," she said.

"No, ma'am." Unconsciously his fingers grazed his left cheek.

"Your Uncle Willie always thought we shoulda put two markers in the family plot out back. Pete and Repeat, you two was. Wasn't more than two months after Curtis disappeared that you up'n left."

"You know I went to college," Wheelwright protested. "Full ride, too. Never cost you a cent."

"That wasn't my point. You coulda written. Willie had a phone." She clutched her chest as the cough shook her body.

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"I was . . . finding myself." No sense in mentioning his drug and alcohol problem, Wheelwright decided.

"Then, Mr. Independent," she said sarcastically, "I 'spect you can still find your way to town."

Wheelwright had never been dismissed with less courtesy, nor, he suspected, had he ever deserved it as much.

Wheelwright remembered when The Old Log Inn, a reproduction of the taverns popular in the nineteenth century, had been built as a tourist attraction back in the late 1960s. Clement County had once thought it could capitalize on the spillover tourist trade from Fort Boonesborough some thirty miles downriver. But the tourists hadn't come where there was no state park or recreational lake. Periodically somebody bought and refurbished the place and eked out a profit with Lions Club luncheons and sports banquets. The Inn was "Official Reunion Headquarters," and he had planned on staying there even before his mother's dismissal.

While registering, he checked the clock. 5:30. Two hours to kill till the alums returned. He was contemplating driving out to the old school when he glanced under the WELCOME BACK CLASS OF '88 banner. He thought he recognized the woman in a black turtleneck dress setting up the registration table.

"Chrissie Combs," he exclaimed.

The woman turned abruptly. Her shoulder-length hair was prematurely starting to show gray. Her features were plainer than he recalled. In high school he'd once heard one of the ladies of the church refer to her as "painted" because of her heavy makeup and tight dresses. And Chrissie was so wild, dating men twice her age. Even in junior high she'd been known as a "river-crosser," going over into Madison County, which was wet, to drink at legendary joints like the First Chance. Rumors had it that she'd even slept with men old enough to be the fathers of her classmates.

"Chrissie. I haven't been called that in years. It's now Christine." Her eyes traversed his body. "Daniel Wheelwright, or would you rather be called by your nasty pen name?"

Approaching her, he said, "How'd you know I had one?"

"Contrary to what your big-city audience believes, there are some people in Kentucky who can read. Some even wear shoes and don't live in shacks or trailer parks. For heaven's sake, some of us have been known to prefer lemonade to moonshine."

"You've read some of my pieces, I take it," he said, surprised at the plenitude of lines in her face.

"Too many. It's too bad you chose to become the Jeff Foxworthy of the literati and make fun of your roots."

"And what did you become?" he asked, recalling how, as Miss

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Popularity, she'd bragged that someday she'd be a famous Hollywood actress with a TV show more popular than *Moonlighting*.

"Would you believe the local schoolmarm? I teach English at good old CCHS. Now what brings The Great Writer into these humble hinterlands?"

"Take it easy," Wheelwright protested. "I just got the invitation, and it seemed like a good reason to come home again."

"You've run out of material," she charged as though she'd just caught a student in a dog-ate-my-homework lie. "Come to think of it, I haven't read any of your stuff lately."

"Maybe this was a mistake," he said. "I'll try you again tomorrow night."

"Seven-thirty," she said, "and it's come as you were, not are."

"I haven't changed a bit," he returned, his hand rubbing his left cheek.

"None of us have, honey." She smiled widely. "None of us have."

Maybe he deserved her sarcasm, Wheelwright considered. Not sure of where to go, he took a chance. In an earlier incarnation the Old Log Inn had once had a poolroom in the back that doubled as a speakeasy, an illegal bottle club for those who didn't want to cross the Kentucky River to drink. Clement County sheriffs looked the other way as long as the clientele didn't get too rowdy or visible. His father had begun many a binge in that room. As if he knew what he was doing, Wheelwright cracked open the back door.

Sounds of colliding billiard balls greeted him, followed by the overpowering smell of tobacco and bourbon. In the background, a twangy guitar and a nasal female voice belted out a duet of betrayal. In his chinos and rolled-up white shirt, he felt as out of place as a rednecked truck driver at the Yale Club. All the patrons were white males. Diversity was still as dead in some parts of Dixie as Daniel Boone.

Wheelwright felt a need for a drink. Of course, if he wanted to get high, all he had to do was inhale deeply. The aroma of "left-handed tobacco" was as palpable as the men's dissatisfaction with their lives. At The Club back in New York he played backgammon and occasional poker, but when he was younger he had come to places like this to watch his father rack them up with the best the county had to offer. It had been awhile, but he felt he still had a good game in him.

"Wanna play some eight-ball?' said a voice from behind a cloud of cigar smoke. "Ten bucks a game?"

Wheelwright was sizing up his potential opponent, a short man with matted straw hair and tattoos on his arms, when he noticed the man's right hand. Specifically the ring on it. "Where'd you get that?" he said.

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"Won it over in Richmond," said the man, holding his jointed cue proudly.

"I mean the ring." Wheelwright felt his stomach knot, his hands clench. "The damn ring. Where'd you get it?"

"You wanna play or admire jew'ry?"

"The ring."

"None of your business, slick." The man turned his back and started off.

Wheelwright grabbed his shoulder. The man spun quickly, knocking Wheelwright's hand off with his cue. "'Round here, a man puts his hand on another man, he's looking to fight or he's queerer than a three-legged steer."

"I'm sorry," Wheelwright apologized, noticing most of the room's inhabitants were watching them. For a moment he saw his father standing in front of him, suddenly storming around in a fit of anger, enraged by the minutest of circumstances. Half expecting to be struck, Wheelwright realized he had more of his father's hot temper than he liked to admit. "I just want to know about the ring."

The short man stared him in the eyes, then laughed. "Well, seein' as you're not light in the loafers, I'll tell you. It was down at The Flats. About a year ago when we was moving some caskets for that resort they're trying to build there."

"You found it in a field?" Wheelwright said, scrutinizing the distinctive chip of coal surrounded by silver prongs on the man's ring finger.

The short man leaned closer so that Wheelwright could smell the Jack Daniels on his breath. "'Tween you and me, slick, I took if off'n a dead man."

"What?"

"Old Embry the coroner gave it to me after the State Police couldn't identify the body. Since it was my backhoe that dug the son-of-a-buck up, Embry figured old Ernie here was entitled to some sort of finder's fee."

Wheelwright pulled out his wallet before he realized it wasn't the safest thing to do in such a place. "What do you want for it?"

"This ring's priceless," said the man. "One of a kind. At least, I ain't never seen another like it."

Wheelwright held up a hundred-dollar bill. "Will this persuade you to part with your treasure?"

The man slipped loose the ring and snatched the bill. "Always thought it was bad luck anyways."

Leaving the room, Wheelwright wrapped his fingers around the ring tightly until the sharp edge of the coal fleck was on the verge of puncturing his flesh. Then his hand went to his left cheek, rubbing across the faint scar, the scar he had received from his

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father's ring, received the day the old man had pushed him away as he left.

Yes, Wheelwright was certain this was the ring that had once belonged to his father.

No tourist, Wheelwright decided, would have ever suspected that the Oldham House, a white, two-story frame with a wraparound porch on the corner of Main and Apple, was actually a funeral home. With its fresh coat of paint and perfect lawn of Kentucky bluegrass, it looked closer to a rest home or a model home. Actually, the reason it always appeared so nice, Wheelwright recalled, was that whenever there was a lull in customers, all the employees were either painting, tending the Oldham's yard, or working their tobacco fields—and heaven help the poor soul who decided to die during tobacco planting or harvesting.

Wheelwright had spent a restless night more in consciousness than dreams. And when he had finally drifted off, he had spent the night wrestling with the same images—all from his senior year in high school when his father had left. Why, Wheelwright asked himself again, had he come back now? He should have stayed in the city, but the truth was that the same dreams had sought him out there too, like a nightly intruder. Wheelwright's Conundrum. Had his lack of success caused him to think more about his past, or had he thought more about his past because success seemed to have deserted him?

The secretary had told him he would find Embry Oldham, the current owner of the ancestral home and business, in the chapel, which would be easy to locate by the aroma of French vanilla. Wheelwright followed his nose to what he supposed had once been the parlor. Sitting in a pew, his hands wrapped around a coffee mug in a half-prayer, half-sipping position, was a white-haired man with a matching moustache and goatee who was wearing a white linen suit, not a dark one. His eyes focused out the side window, he reminded Wheelwright more of Colonel Sanders than a mortician.

"Damn Wal-Mart," he exclaimed. "That kid in gardening swore those were hardy mums, but they're not coming back any more than my last client." He pointed at an empty patch of mulch. "You don't see any growth out there, do you?"

"No, sir," said Wheelwright. The Oldhams had run the funeral parlor in Woodhole as long as anybody could recall, so Wheelwright was surprised at the old man's attitude toward a potential client in "his greatest hour of need."

"Wal-Mart hasn't been the same since old Sam died. Jees-o-Pete, I'd've liked to arrange that funeral." He set down his coffee on the window ledge. "What can I do for you . . . Daniel, Daniel

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Wheelwright? It's not your mom or uncle, is it?"

"How did you remember . . ."

"Good business habit. Since mosta my clients come from Clement County, I make it my business to know everybody." He stood up and shook Wheelwright's hand. "Now, what can I do for you?"

"I met a guy named Ernie last night. Said he found a body down by The Flats last year."

"John Doe, the sixth."

"I take it you never did establish positive ID on him, then?"

"Not my job. KSP post down in Richmond sent an officer up. They even took the remains over to the University of Kentucky for a workup. Best we could figure, it was a male been in the ground over ten years without the benefit of one of my fine coffins."

Ignoring the coroner's attempt at humor, Wheelwright said, "Isn't it unusual not to identify a body?"

"Not really. State makes a token effort. If we want more, we gotta pay, and your Uncle Willie thought the money could be better spent repaving 629. Of course, 629—"

"Runs by his farm," Wheelwright finished. "Is he still county judge-executive?"

"Over a decade. You *have* been away." He wrapped his hands around his coffee mug and stared out the window. "Willie hates to pay for the county to bury itinerants and such, but I usually give him a break. Civic duty, you understand."

Wheelwright nodded. "This Ernie told me you said he could keep something belonging to the dead man."

"Tell Ernie he's a bald-faced liar. That'd be against the law. Now he mighta taken something off the deceased 'fore I got the body, but I'm the elected county coroner, not the sheriff."

A bell rang in the hallway.

"For everything there is a season," Oldham said, buttoning his jacket and smoothing the wrinkles. "Nice to see you, Daniel." He started away, then turned. "There was something about John Doe, the sixth, but I can't recall it right now. Give me some time."

"I'll be back."

"Make it quicker than this visit. I don't need ten years to figure this thing out."

Wheelwright followed Apple Street until he came to 629. Remembering an old country lane with more curves than a New York City table dancer, he was surprised to discover a well-paved, four-lane highway heading toward the river. The county road fund had indeed been the beneficiary of Uncle Willie's fiscal choices. Of course, as duly elected county judge-executive, Willie Buchanan had probably become the most powerful man in Clement County.

Wheelwright wasn't afraid to admit he was running scared—

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scared he'd find that John Doe the sixth was his father and just as scared he'd find the body wasn't. Had he really come home because some sort of familial alarm had gone off in his head telling him it was time to find out what had happened all those years ago? He was sure his therapy group would think so.

The red pickup appeared in his mirror as if conjured up. Then he heard a horn frantically honking. A hand waved from behind dark glass. Wheelwright pulled over. So did the pickup. Wheelwright got out, as did a man in a white T-shirt and Reds baseball cap.

"Jack," said a surprised Wheelwright, "I thought you'd be working this morning."

"Wish I was," the man answered, sticking a chaw of tobacco in his right cheek. "'Course, work's not that easy to find around here since the coal mines petered out and the resort hasn't been built yet." He began working his plug. "Tried to catch you at the hotel. They said you'd gone over to Oldham's. Must've jess missed ya."

"What can I do for you?" The September morning was already in the nineties, and Wheelwright could feel the sweat oozing out on his forehead.

"You 'member me?"

"Other than yesterday, no."

"Use'ta hang around with your daddy. One time we was best friends. Then he married Rebecca."

Wheelwright thought he saw where Jack was headed. "And you didn't."

"Not that time anyhow. Things is different now."

For some reason, Wheelwright thought of Ralph Waldo Emerson deciding he was a better poet simply because he had outlived Edgar Allan Poe. "What do you want, Jack?"

Jack oozed a wad of dark spittle out on his tongue, then flicked it on the grass beside Wheelwright's shoes. "I'm a simple man, so I'll say it straight out—go back to wherever you come from."

Wheelwright felt apprehensive. His hand swiped his left cheek. Most of his confrontations were with editors saying no and maître d's unable to locate a table. "Why should I do that?"

"Because you being here upsets your mama. You don't understand the grief Rebecca's been through over your daddy leaving, and you sure as hell don't care or you'd been back this way sooner."

"That's quite an accusation."

Jack spat a wad between Wheelwright's shoes. "You ever notice how people are a whole lot better when they put the past behind them? What's done needs to be buried. Then people can get on with their lives. It's taken your mama a long time to stop cryin', and last night she kept bawlin' like a newborn." This time the tobacco juice flew past Wheelwright's right ear. "You lit outta here once before. It's time history repeated itself."

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"And if I don't?" said Wheelwright, trying to sound defiant.

Jack rubbed his callused, weather-beaten hands. "Next time old Embry sees you, it could be as a customer."

Wheelwright was still shaking when 629 stopped, right at the apron of Willie's driveway. As he drove up the recently tarred road, past the tobacco fields Willie always leased out to tenants, he wondered why he hadn't come to see his favorite uncle earlier. After all, even before his father had taken off, Willie had treated him like a son. In fact, Wheelwright never forgot that Willie had been the only member of his family to watch him play the lead in the Clement County High production of *Music Man.*

He drove through a split-rail fence gate and around some Carolina hemlocks he had helped his uncle plant. On the outside the log house was almost an exact duplicate of the one he had grown up in on the ridge across the Clement River. Old Papa Buchanan had insisted that what he left for one child he had to leave for the other. The difference was that Willie had put an addition on back and modernized his house. Getting out of the Boxster, Wheelwright once again heard the whine of heavy machinery. Down where the Clement River flowed into the Kentucky, several bulldozers were piling up clay on either side. It looked as though they were building a dam. Was Willie going to flood The Flats?

An old John Deere with a bat-wing mower pulled up rolled toward him. The driver in a green cap waved. Wheelwright gave his uncle a military salute, which he had been doing as long as his uncle had been telling him stories about being in the Navy over in Viet Nam. For some reason, Willie had never married, and Wheelwright had always wondered if his uncle thought of him as the son he never had.

Even in his fifties, Willie moved his huge frame around athletically. Wheelwright started to shake the man's hand, but found himself hugging him instead, drenching himself in the sweat pouring through the button-down shirt that had always been his uncle's trademark.

"How are you, boy?' said Willie, his smile wider than the bill on his John Deere baseball cap.

"Fine, sir. Just fine, now."

As his uncle entered the house, Wheelwright stopped at the door. "Aren't you going to pipe me aboard?"

His uncle blew an imaginary horn, then said, "You get some of that there writer's block, Dan? I go down to the mailbox every morning just hopin'. When the phone rings, I pray it's you rather than some of those construction people."

Wheelwright stared down into the dusty valley. "I've had some problems recently."

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"Nothing serious, I hope."

Wheelwright decided not to tell his uncle about his near-breakdown or the therapy or the writing offers that seemed to dry up overnight. "How's Mama been?" he asked, changing the subject.

"Truthfully, boy, not well. You know she lit up her first cigarette the day your daddy disappeared, and I swear every time she puffs on one she sees him in the smoke."

"How is this Jack? Good for her?"

"A hell of a lot better to her than your daddy. I know you hate to hear that, but facts is facts. Jack don't drink 'cept occasionally on weekends. He stays home rather than goin' to town with the boys. He's a good rockman with steady employment. He gets almost eight dollars a square foot now."

"That good?"

"Damn straight, and he usually puts in a twelve-hour workday."

Wheelwright blurted out, "He just threatened my life a few minutes ago if I didn't leave town."

Willie shook his head. "I suppose I could lean on him or get Sheriff Dezarn to, but the boy's probably plain scared."

"Of me?"

"Of what you represent. In that respect he's a lot like your daddy. You see, most folks around here don't like change. They don't move around or want too much. Die where they're born. Make a comfortable wage. Heck, most of 'em won't work a forty-hour week. They'll figure out exactly how much they need and work for it—no more, no less. Round here they call it Budweiser's Disease."

Wheelwright didn't know whether to laugh or not. "How come you're not like that? I mean, you're from around here, cut out of the same cloth?"

"When I was a boy, my daddy used to take me over to that ridge your mama lives on. There's a hundred-and-fifty-year-old oak up there, and every spring he'd ask me what I noticed about it. Well, I learnt fast what he wanted to hear. 'It's bigger,' I'd say. Then he'd say, 'Growth is good, son. Growth is good. You grow or you die a little more each day.' I understood that—your daddy didn't. Becky's my blood, so I had to stay here to help her."

"That dam down there," posed Wheelwright, "is that progress?"

"I 'spect so. Next summer you're gonna be standin' here lookin' down on Lake Clement."

"What about The Flats down there? The old slave wall overlooking the Kentucky River?"

"You wanta see those things, you'll need to be like me and my old buddies in the SEALs. Get yourself checked out on scuba gear."

"I talked to a man last night who worked down there."

"Yeah, I hired some local boys to help me move the old graveyard up to Dodge's Ridge over there."

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First fingering his left cheek, Wheelwright pulled the silver ring out of his pocket.

Willie stared at it. "Where'd you get that?"

"A man named Ernie said he took it from a body they dug up in The Flats."

Willie leaned against the rough-cut table at which Wheelwright had eaten many meals. The younger man noted his uncle's eyes. They wouldn't look at him. Then a soft breeze came up from down below, bringing the sound of the bulldozers. That's when Willie spoke. "Hindsight suggests we should have spent the money back then. Completed the investigation."

"Why didn't you?"

"Maybe I was afraid it was your daddy. Maybe it was my civic responsibility not to finish up."

"Not to?" repeated Wheelwright incredulously.

"It appears I never gave you a local civics lesson. Plop down on this log bench. Your daddy built it, you know? He was always good with his hands." Willie sat beside Wheelwright. "We're a poor county, Dan. Since the mines closed, we got the second-highest unemployment rate in the state. Third lowest in per capita income. And it's been gettin' worse. Lots of Hispanics, migrant workers showin' up to take the bottom-of-the-barrel jobs. And they rent, so that means they don't pay property taxes. Still, we got to educate their kids and provide them with social services. That's the law, like it or not."

"And that takes money. Somehow, though, you were able to four-lane 629 to your front door," said Wheelwright sarcastically.

"Not so much my front door as to Lake Clement. It's taken a decade to put this package together. You see, your mama and I have decided to donate almost one thousand acres that once belonged to our daddy to build this lake. Lots of folk up in Frankfort think that with its low taxes and lower cost of living, Kentucky'd make a great retirement location. State has no tax on state or federal pensions or on the first thirty-five thousand in an IRA or other pension distributions. Land won't grow much 'cept tobacco and the government's gonna phase that out. So what's left? How many jobs you think a resort and a retirement village can create?"

Wheelwright stared into the display case beside the fireplace. Inside were rifles, pistols, group photographs, but something was missing, something he'd seen when years ago as a kid he'd been so fascinated with the mementos of Willie's military life. "That ring, it's my daddy's, isn't it?"

"Too distinctive not to be."

"Now do you wish you'd identified the body?"

"I didn't know about the ring. Of course, I'd have tried, but it's probably better I didn't. Lordy, Dan, it was hard enough on your

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mama after Curtis disappeared. If I'd have shelled out good county money and we'd found out that body was your daddy . . . well, I don' t think Becky could have taken it."

Wheelwright sat staring at the displayed remnants of Willie's past. "I don't know," he said after a while. "I just don't know."

Wheelwright had to drive into town, then back toward the homestead in order to circle around The Flats. Jack's pickup was gone, so he figured it was a good time to mend some fences with his mother. He found her sitting out back at the well that had been the family's water source until she had convinced his father they needed indoor plumbing. She was smoking an unfiltered cigarette, exhaling it through her mouth and drawing it back into her nose.

"Your Papa Buchanan loved his cigarettes," she said when she saw him. "He used to say in a world of toil, it and family were the only pleasures he had."

"I . . . I never knew him well," Wheelwright confessed.

"He was a quiet man. Never said much after my mama died." She started coughing in a fit so bad she dropped her cigarette.

Wheelwright stepped closer. "Uncle Willie says that you started smoking right after Daddy left."

"Story of my life, Daniel. Mama, Papa, your daddy, you—everybody's left me." She grabbed her chest as a coughing spasm took possession of her body.

"Uncle Willie didn't."

"Willie's been good to me," she said. "Better'n I deserve."

Wheelwright tried not to stare into her sad eyes or at her frail body trembling in pain. He couldn't bring himself to tell her what he'd learned. Maybe Willie was right—the whole thing should be left alone. His father was dead. Probably drank himself into a stupor and walked in front of a truck or fell off a ledge. What could be gained by causing his mother more hurt?

Just before the class reunion started, Embry Oldham dropped off a large Manila envelope at Wheelwright's room. Inside were some black-and-white pictures and a handwritten note.

"I'm sorry," said the coroner, leaving.

Neither moving nor saying a word, Wheelwright sat staring at the pictures, each angle showing a badly decomposed body in a shredded leather jacket. The note consisted of the coroner's preliminary findings. "Bones chipped and scratched . . . probable cause of death . . . multiple stab wounds all over." Wheelwright didn't want to, but he began to cry. Then he got real cold. Starting to shake, he wrapped himself in the bed's blanket. He and his father had never been really close. His daddy had never understood his artistic longings, and Wheelwright admitted that he had

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never been able to work with his hands, but, damn it, nobody deserved to die that way, his body mutilated so that it barely resembled a human.

He wasn't sure how long someone had been knocking on his door. He thought he might have gone to sleep, but the knocking wouldn't let him drift off.

"Daniel, are you in there?"

He sat up in bed and wiped his eyes. It was Christine. What was she doing here? Hadn't she claimed those days of knocking on strange men's doors were over?

"Daniel, the reunion started half an hour ago," said Christine. "I don't think you drove all the way to Kentucky to sleep through it?"

"Go away."

"Let me in," she persisted.

And for some reason he did. She had on a strapless summer dress all covered with red and yellow flowers, and her hair was done up in a twist. Since he'd seen her last, she'd obviously colored it, for no gray was visible.

"Are you all right?" she asked with genuine concern.

"No."

"You don't look in any shape to party. I know, why don't you take me for a drive in that snazzy car of yours."

"What about all your friends downstairs?"

"Them? I see them every day. Probably too much. You, I haven't seen in ten years."

They drove down the old roads, the ones Uncle Willie had never gotten around to getting repaired.

"Remember how we used to call this stretch Pothole Paradise?" she said.

"That's when everybody wanted to take you to watch the submarine races down on the river."

"Up periscope," she said with a giggle. Then her tone grew somber. "I've waited long enough. Are you going to tell me what's bothering you?"

He simply said, "I found out today that my daddy's dead."

Christine stiffened in the seat next to him. "Dead?" she said. "How did you . . . "

Wheelwright explained what he had learned.

"Truthfully," she said, "how could you have expected otherwise? I mean, he didn't have many friends, was unfaithful to your mother, and loved to get stinking drunk."

"You almost sound like you knew him."

Christine hesitated. "I did."

"What?"

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"Stop here and we'll talk about it."

Wheelwright pulled the Boxster over. They were on the opposite ridge from Uncle Willie's, overlooking where the Clement River poured into the Kentucky.

"Come on," Christine said.

She led him down the hill. The sun disappeared behind him. The air was eerily still in that moment when the day creatures stop their noise and the night creatures haven't yet started. The old fishing cabin where he'd come as a boy to draw and write still stood beside the rock wall. Christine sat down on a smooth stone.

"Who'd have thought the old slave wall would still be standing?" Wheelwright said.

"Actually, it shouldn't be called a slave wall," she corrected. "Like most of them around Kentucky, it was erected in the eighteen thirties by Scotch-Irish immigrants. They're the ones who taught the slaves how to lay stone. Things aren't always how they seem."

"Which is a good segue into your explaining to me how you knew my father."

She picked up a rock and heaved it down into the eddies formed by the Clement River running into the Kentucky. "We were lovers."

Ten years after the fact, half of them in New York, and he couldn't believe it. "You were what?"

"When I was young, I wanted to experience everything I could. For some reason I thought I might die tomorrow. You know I ran with a fast, older crowd. One night when I was eighteen and out drinking, I met your father. We got to be friends. He'd bring me out here and tell me things he probably never told you."

Surprised that someone his age had been with his father, Wheelwright's fingers involuntarily grazed his left cheek. "Like what?"

"Like how you didn't have any interest in working with your hands, how your mom and uncle were always pushing him to do something he didn't want to. He especially didn't ever want to sell this land. Said some things got to be preserved as they were or we weren't ever going to know how it was."

"He . . . did love the land. I remember my mama wanted to lease some acres to these cousins who were interested in growing tobacco, but Daddy disagreed. He said no one could touch these woods 'cause they weren't God. Funny, I haven't thought about that in years."

"Curtis did love the land. He used to tell me how frustrated and alone he felt because no one else agreed with him."

"I did," Wheelwright snapped back. "Once . . . once, before I had to take revenge on this place for taking my daddy from me."

"All those stories and pieces making fun of Clement County."

They sat and listened as the night creatures took over the silence.

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"I'm going to tell you something I've never told another soul," Christine said tentatively.

"What?"

"I was pretty sure Curtis was dead. I knew before you did."

"How?"

"That night he walked away from your house. He was coming to meet me in this fishing shack." She pointed at the rundown house. "He never showed, but right about the time he was due I heard a scream worse than a cat being gutted. Then Curtis shouted out, 'No. Don't!' I got scared. You don't forget a scream like that. I lit out of there and didn't look back. In the next few weeks I didn't hear from him, so I knew something bad had happened that night."

"You never tried to find out?"

"Look, I was eighteen and I didn't have the best reputation in town. I figured that if I started asking questions, who knew what I might be accused of. But I knew I should do something. One night a few weeks later I had a clear sense of where my life was headed. I went to summer school, then to college."

"Are you trying to tell me something good came out of all this?"

"All I know is if it hadn't been for your daddy and whatever happened that night, at best I'd be barefoot and pregnant in these hills, certainly not leading a productive life as a teacher." She snuggled up next to him. "It's getting cold."

"I'll take you home."

"Actually, Daniel, you're the first company I've truly enjoyed in a long time."

Wheelwright stood up. "Any other time . . . you and me . . . this place . . . but I've got something I've got to do tonight."

The only light at Willie's was supplied by the full moon. Unceremoniously, Wheelwright pounded on the wooden door. A light came on and after a while the door cracked. Wheelwright pushed his way in.

"But I didn't pipe you aboard," protested Willie, standing in a navy-blue robe over his pajamas.

"Cut the crap," said Wheelwright curtly. He hurried over to the dimly lit display case. "Where is it?"

"Dan, my boy, what are you talkin' about? And what are you doin' here? I thought you were supposed to be at your reunion."

"You know what I'm looking for."

"I do?"

"When I was here earlier, I noticed something missing. Well, I finally remembered what it was that sat between the forty-five automatic and the web belt. Where's your SEAL knife?"

"Lost it, I guess."

"Hell, how many times did you tell me that knife was as much a part of your body as your right arm?"

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"What are you gettin' at, boy?"

"Did you lose it that night my daddy was killed?"

Willie trudged slowly to the hickory easy chair he used for reading. Suddenly he slumped down and buried his head in his hands. "What do you really want, Dan?"

"I figured out the real reason I came back to Clement County wasn't that reunion, but to find out what happened to my daddy. Every year I guess it bothers me more. In the past day, I've put some things together, such as you never liked Daddy, never wanted him married to your sister."

"Sometimes people don't get along—"

"It was more than that. You had grandiose plans for developing The Flats, but my daddy was going to stop you."

"It's true your father didn't believe in change or—"

"You had to do something—"

"Hold on, boy, you're not suggestin' that I—"

"You, Mr. Judge-Executive, roadbuilder, and trained Navy killer, met him that night after he left me and my mama, killed him with the missing knife, and planted him in the ground so nobody would know." Wheelwright chuckled and shook his head. "It's quite an irony that somebody digging up bodies for your precious development was the very thing that exposed you."

Even in the weak light Wheelwright could see Willie's face flush. "I raise you like you was my own, I take care of your mama because you ran away, and this . . . this is what you think of me. I'm a murderer." He pushed himself up and walked over to the display case. Bending over, he reached underneath and emerged with a knife in his hand. "I'm not gonna lie to you, Dan. I killed men, many men, but that was war. Thirty years ago in a time me and the rest of this country'd rather forget about. You see, rules were different back then, over there."

"And now?" Wheelwright felt his heart race, his chest tighten. "Ten years ago. That was a war, too, a private war. You saw your dreams of a development going down in defeat and you reacted. You got rid of the one man who stood in your way. You killed my daddy."

Willie's hand tightened around the knife as he moved toward Wheelwright. "You don't know what you're talkin' about, son."

"Then why don't you explain it to me."

The table between them, Willie raised the knife and brought it down hard, its point embedding in the hand-hewn oak. "Damn, I knew it would eventually come out. I think that's why I had those guys exhumin' the bodies in The Flats. Maybe I wasn't movin' an old graveyard. Maybe my conscience was helpin' the truth to be unburied."

"What is the truth, Willie?"

"Dan, I don't have to tell you that Curtis was a hard man. From

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the time he married Becky, your daddy never treated her right. I saw her literally crawl on her knees to get him to install indoor plumbin'. You should've been in this room just one of the times she showed up with tears, a red cheek, a bruised arm, or worse, because Curtis tried to 'persuade' her to see somethin' his way."

Wheelwright sat down opposite the suddenly withered older man. "He hit her? I never saw . . ."

"Curtis stopped 'bout the time you were born, probably because Becky gave him a son. And I threatened to kill him if he ever laid hands on you. He ever do it?"

"Once. The night he left. It shocked me so I jumped in the river and tried to wash the cut off."

"I *shoulda* killed him. Then that horrible night would never have happened."

"Wait a minute," said Wheelwright, "are you saying you *didn't* kill my daddy?"

Willie walked over to the window. "I'd rather take a beatin' than tell you this, but so much has come out already. I guess after all these years you deserve the truth."

Wheelwright rubbed his cheek. "If not you, Willie, then who?"

"That night I was out in one of the upper fields tryin' to finish mowin' 'fore darkness set in. Well, I thought I saw somebody go into the house, so I jumped down and headed this way. Well, to my surprise this person comes out carryin' my SEAL knife."

"Who, Willie? *Who?"*

His uncle turned toward him. "Just remember, you wanted to know this." His head sank. "It was Becky, your mama."

Wheelwright felt almost as if he'd been stabbed. "You're lying," he yelled across the room. "Just trying to protect yourself."

"Wish I was."

"But why?"

"Maybe it was years of abuse, the years she'd been denied a normal life. Maybe she caught him foolin' around, or maybe she saw what he done to you that night."

"Why didn't you stop her? Do something?"

"By the time I got to the house, she'd headed down to the river. I scrambled after her. Then I reached a rise down there. She and Curtis was a-yellin' at each other. Curtis smacked her worse than a coon dog. As he turned to leave, she ran up and jumped on his back. Years of anger came out in that blade. Lord, she let him have it. I hurried down the hill, but she was gone. All I could do was bury Curtis near the old graveyard and clean off my knife."

"What did my mama have to say about what she'd done?"

"Nothin'. You see, she acted like nothin' had ever happened. She said she thought Curtis might've run off with his little whores. I never told Becky what I'd seen."

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"You mean you never confronted her?"

"What good would it'a done? She had to live with her actions, and—maybe it was wrong—I figured Curtis got what he deserved."

Wheelwright felt dumbstruck. "All these years nobody has ever known the truth?"

"I did. Your mama did, and Embry owed me. So when he first told me he suspected foul play, I persuaded him just to file his notes and suspicions away."

"He never called the state police?"

"I convinced him they'd just stir up a mess for nothin'. Claimed the body was just one of those migrants chasin' after another man's wife or cheatin' at cards."

"Then we've got to settle this now. Tell the authorities."

His uncle put a hand on his shoulder. "Dan, what would we gain? Your mama's been punished enough—before and after what she done. 'Sides, old Doc Stair told me Becky's in bad shape from her smokin'. Emphysema. She won't see Christmas."

They stood apart in the dim light for the longest time, not saying a thing. After a while Willie said, "What are you going to do, Dan?"

Without answering, Wheelwright rose and walked out the door.

When the sun rose over the old slave wall, Wheelwright was still awake and conscious enough to appreciate the newness that first light gave The Flats. In a few weeks the killing frost would sneak in to take its toll. In the decade since he'd last sat on this fishing-cabin porch, not much had changed. And even if Willie completed his lake, the land would basically be the same as when Boone had passed through on his way to settle Boonesborough.

Wheelwright stared at the dry-set limestone wall. No, the land hadn't changed, but he had. He started to raise his fingers to his cheek, then caught himself. The repeated touching of the old wound had been an unconscious impulse tied to the uncertainty of his father's disappearance. Well, now he knew.

He'd changed in other ways. He'd realized his whole literary reputation as a satirist of these people was unfair. He'd built it by tearing down his heritage. Now he had the urge to write again, to give the land and its people their honest due. To tell about teen tramps who became schoolteachers, the conflict of good men torn between progress and history, the desires to protect and let grow. To show the world Christine's truth that, like the slave walls, many things weren't the way people had always perceived them.

One thing was for certain. He would stay around—perhaps awhile, perhaps longer—to get to know, in the time she had left, the woman who had lived with so much pain. Sometimes in old houses there were iron rings you couldn't see that held you just as tightly as if you were a slave. ●

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Picture Palace

by Loren D. Estleman

Loren D. Estleman's film-detective short stories starring a UCLA film archivist with the unlikely name Valentino are a movie buff's delight. This new case, Mr. Estleman says, is one for the Fellini fans. In it Valentino ventures to Florence in the hope of procuring a copy of an illustrious director's master work.

"I wait for you, *signore*," said the taxi driver. "*Signore* Diavolo entertains no visitors."

Valentino paid his fare, including a tip in return for the little man's concern. "That won't be necessary. He's agreed to see me."

"I wait." The driver slid a Florence newspaper from above the sun visor and unfolded it.

Giuseppe Diavolo's villa, perched on a hill overlooking the city of Dante, was very much in keeping with the man's work: earthy but elegant. The columns on the portico were discolored and cracked, like those of an ancient ruin, and the marble facing on the walls had been patched many times with plaster of varying quality that faded in different colors, creating a harlequin effect. Valentino had never before visited a director's home that reminded him so much of his movies.

The woman who answered the doorbell was very tall and looked even taller because of her hair—teased and heavily sprayed so that it resembled architecture, and obviously dyed black. It brought out the lines in her face beneath the thick pancake. She wore a long printed dress of heavy silk. "Sì?" She looked down at him along the straight length of a nose that belonged on a Greek statue.

"My name is Valentino. Mr. Diavolo is expecting me."

"No." She shut the door.

He rang the bell again. When she opened the door again, he showed her the letter he had brought. "I wrote Mr. Diavolo back in February that I'd be in Florence at this time and would like an appointment. This is his invitation."

She glanced at the sheet, snatched it out of his hand, and pushed the door shut again.

He rang again. The woman's voice came from inside. "Go away! I call police."

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As Valentino approached the cab, the driver folded his newspaper and returned it to its place above the visor. "You see?" He started the motor. "Geniuses, they are pigs. I say to my wife, be happy you married *un imbecille.*"

Valentino barely heard him. "Do you know where to find the office of *Celluloide?*"

Celluloide was the cinema magazine with the largest circulation in Florence; which meant the driver had to radio his dispatcher for directions. At length he drew up before a crumbling building in a dilapidated neighborhood, collected his fare and another tip, and was still watching his former passenger anxiously when Valentino looked back from the entrance.

A clanking elevator the size of a coffin lifted the visitor to the third floor, where he found the office behind a door with the magazine's name flaking off the frosted glass.

"Angela Mondadori, please."

The underfed male seated behind the front desk looked up briefly from his ancient typewriter, then leaned back and shouted at the top of his lungs. "Angie!"

The clatter of typewriters that filled the shabby room paused not at all. Soon a tall, slender young woman with black hair shorn close to her skull emerged from behind a partition plastered over with playbills and approached Valentino with her dark brows lifted. She was an elegant figure in such a setting, expertly made up in a tailored pink suit that put him in mind of the young Jackie Kennedy. She might have stepped off the cover of an Italian fashion magazine of the 1960s.

When Valentino introduced himself she smiled warmly. "I've enjoyed your letters. Face-to-face I can't believe you're not Rudolph's grandson." Her English was fluent, although charmingly accented.

"We share the same brand of hair oil." His resemblance to the silent-film star whose name he bore never embarrassed him in the company of fellow aficionados. "May I take you to lunch? I'd like to talk."

"Let me take you."

Her car was tiny even by modern standards, a classic. Riding in it, he felt he'd stepped into a frame of *The Bicycle Thief.* She steered them deftly through a succession of twisting streets jammed with traffic, using her horn more often than her brakes, and parked before a restaurant with a terrace that looked out on most of the city. The waiters addressed her as *Signora* Mondadori. Her guest complimented the wine and pasta.

"My ex-husband and I dined here all the time," she said. "I got custody of the place on weekdays."

"Salud." He clinked his glass against hers and drank. "I tried to see your father today. A woman slammed the door in my face twice."

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"That would be Constanza. My dear stepmother."

"I showed her *Signore* Diavolo's letter. It got in; I didn't. Has she always been this protective?"

"Until about two months ago, she was one of the most gracious hostesses in Tuscany. Then suddenly she started turning away visitors. Even I can't get in."

He breathed in the air of Tuscany, redolent of spice and tomato sauce and the dust of Caesars. "Giuseppe Diavolo is one of the greatest *auteur* directors of the postwar period. After you gave me his address, I spent months persuading him to donate a print of his masterpiece, *L'enfanti del Inferno*, to the UCLA archives. I'd rather fall on my sword than return empty-handed."

"Constanza claims he's too ill to see anyone, but she won't say if he's consulted a doctor. I know he was treated for a heart condition several years ago. I've called every physician in the city. None has seen him. Am I permitted to dust off a movie cliché and say I suspect foul play?" She smiled nervously.

"Does she fit the role of *femme fatale?*"

"I always felt she married my father for security rather than love, but that's an ancient and honorable custom in Italy. We got on well enough until I started pressing for details."

"Have you tried the police?"

She toyed with her pasta. "I'm unsure of my ground. My parents separated when I was small. My father never visited; his films were more important to him than his family. I suppose I still resent him for that. When I began reviewing films I used my husband's name and built up a reputation independent of Giuseppe Diavolo's. I renewed contact with him last year more as a journalist than as his daughter. We're practically strangers."

"The police don't know that. You should tell them your suspicions and have them accompany you for a visit."

"I envy you Americans." She smiled again. "You refuse to accept the existence of insoluble problems."

"It's all those movies. Everything is resolved inside two hours. Will you let me know how this comes out?" He gave her the name of his hotel.

"Of course. Movies need endings." She summoned the bill.

Il Circolo Sesto was playing on the television in Valentino's room. He doubted it was coincidence; the city of Diavolo's birth was bound to feature his films on the local station regularly. The archivist, who considered this most famous title in the director's *oeuvre* his most murky and pretentious, enjoyed nevertheless the scene in which the hero arm-wrestles the Devil. He stretched out on the bed to watch it and found himself still riveted half an hour later when the telephone jarred him out of the sequence in the Roman catacombs.

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"Valentino." He punched the Mute button on the remote.

"This is Angela Mondadori. My stepmother told the police they are welcome to visit, but that if I come with them I won't be admitted."

"Did she say why?"

"No. The police assume my father and I don't get along. 'It is their home, *signora;* we cannot tell them who they must or must not allow to cross their threshold.'" Her impression of an Italian police official came right out of Vittorio De Sica.

"Obviously he's never seen *Open City.*"

"Will you go in with them? We haven't known each other long, but I trust you more than I do the police. If you say everything's all right, I'll believe you."

"Why would your stepmother let me in after barring you? She's turned me away once already."

"Please? I'm frightened. I know I haven't the right, but I *am* his daughter."

He watched Sophia Loren pleading with an impossibly young Marcello Mastroianni on the black-and-white screen at the foot of the bed. When he agreed to accompany the police to Diavolo's door, he wasn't sure which request was more effective; the one in his ear or the one playing out in silence in front of him. He decided, not for the first time, that he had seen far too many movies.

The police inspector's name was Cabrini. He reminded Valentino of Claude Rains in *Casablanca,* minus the urbanity. The archivist was pretty sure Inspector Renault would not sit behind his desk with his cap on, no matter how jauntily it was slanted, nor conduct an official conversation with the remains of his lunch spread out on his blotter and a napkin tucked inside his uniform collar. The pencil moustache, at least, was authentic.

"You are a detective?" Cabrini was looking at Valentino's business card.

"A historian, actually. That bit about 'film detective' is just to get people's attention. Tracking down odd scraps of celluloid can be like a manhunt sometimes."

"I would not know. I am myself an enthusiast of the opera." He returned Valentino's passport. "Since your papers are in order, you are free to visit any public place in our beautiful city. If, however, *Signora* Diavolo refuses to admit you to her house, I cannot argue the point."

"I understand."

"Buòno." The inspector rose, tugged down his short jacket, and led the way to the door. There he glanced down, and with a sheepish expression went back and deposited the napkin on the desk.

Today, Constanza Diavolo had on a sleeveless dress of maroon vel-

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vet. Valentino admired the muscle definition in her upper arms, rare in a woman her age. She had been warned by telephone of the visit, and so did not appear surprised to find an official in uniform standing on her porch. Her eyes hardened dangerously when they shifted to Valentino. His thin hope that she would not recognize him from their brief first meeting vanished.

Removing his cap, Cabrini launched into what sounded like a formal apology in Italian. Valentino heard his name. Again the hard look, longer this time. Presently it flickered. She shrugged and opened the door wide.

The entryway was as large as some houses, with sunlight gleaming off polished marble and a number of life-size statues scattered about like guests at a cocktail party. The visitors followed their hostess through a succession of similar rooms, elegantly furnished in mahogany and silk, onto a back terrace whose view of Florence and the broad, unpredictable River Arno made the vista from yesterday's restaurant look like a faded mural. An elderly man in a white linen suit and Panama hat sat at an umbrella-shaded table reading, of all things, *Variety*.

Valentino's throat caught when the newspaper came down, exposing tanned features behind plain black Ray•Bans and a neat white pencil moustache beside which Cabrini's was a silly prop. From the crown of his hat to the unlit cigar propped between the fingers of his left hand, the man was an icon. He made the film detective, who met regularly with international stars, feel like a little boy holding an autograph book.

Diavolo shook the inspector's hand, speaking softly in Italian, then switched to English when he grasped Valentino's. "I have enjoyed your letters. Please sit and share my shade."

Constanza withdrew, to return moments later bearing a tray containing glasses and a pitcher of lemonade. She poured and served, then seated herself beside her husband. Valentino noted that no servant had yet made an appearance.

"This is a beautiful home," said Cabrini.

"Grazie." The director flashed his famous white smile. "My best films began here, in my head. It is less a home to me than a national treasure."

Valentino was charmed rather than put off by his host's frank egotism. It was as emblematic of him as his white suits and cold cigar. "I'm surprised you don't invite more people in."

Diavolo understood the implied question.

"My wife is protective of my privacy. I am writing my memoirs, you see, and concentration is a problem. To spare me interruptions she has appointed herself my Cerberus."

"It is a difficult thing to be forced to lie to one's own daughter." The inspector fingered his cap in his lap.

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Constanza muttered something in Italian.

Diavolo sipped from his glass. The hand holding the cigar remained motionless on the table. "You forget she is a member of the press. If she knew the truth, she would be after me to publish excerpts in her magazine. So her stepmother tells her I'm ill."

"When will you finish?" Valentino asked. "The world has waited so long to hear you comment at length on your career.

"Six months, a year. *Chi consta,* who knows? I am old, and no studio is pressing for a release date. I shall tell her when I am receiving visitors again."

"About *L'enfanti del Inferno—"* Valentino began.

Constanza turned to the inspector. "You wanted to know, my husband, is he in good condition. You are satisfied?"

"Sì." He stood abruptly and leaned down to shake the director's hand again. "Thank you, *signore,* for your hospitality. I apologize for this interruption."

"Prego."

Cabrini turned a stony face on Valentino, who had no choice but to follow his lead. *Signora* Diavolo thumped the front door shut behind them with finality.

"I don't buy it!" Angela said. "I don't buy it for a minute. It's bunk."

Despite his sympathy, Valentino was amused by the language of her displeasure. It was obvious she had learned her English from old Hollywood movies. They were standing in the lobby of his hotel, where she had been waiting when he returned from her father's villa. She was wearing another tailored suit, this one powder-blue. She reminded him now of Audrey Hepburn.

"I heard it from his own lips," he said. Another old line.

"Since when is he so susceptible to distraction? All his films were created in the midst of chaos. She's got some hold on him, I know it."

"I had the impression once she was coaching him. That means nothing. A lot of old people take direction from their spouses. Even some young creative types depend on someone to prod them into action. He certainly didn't act as if he was afraid of her."

"You're absolutely sure it was him."

"He's almost as recognizable as his stars. I've seen his *Sixty Minutes* interview at least—" He broke off.

"What is it? You just thought of something."

He shook his head. "Probably nothing. I watch millions of feet of film every week; it's easy to get mixed up. Do you have any of your father's interviews on film or tape?"

"At the office. I have my key with me."

"You take all the fun out of breaking and entering."

Angela's desk was no different from the others at *Celluloide*

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except for the work piled on top. It stood in the middle of the floor without any partitions to separate it from those of the lowly columnists and copywriters whose labor filled the magazine. When she switched on the gooseneck lamp the cone of hard white light reminded Valentino of the monochrome settings of most of Giuseppe Diavolo's early films.

She rummaged through drawers filled with videotapes in cardboard sleeves, found one bearing the hand-lettered label she wanted, and popped it into a combination TV/VCR on the desk. The tape contained an interview with the director on Italian television. Diavolo sat in a plastic scoop chair on a bare soundstage with his legs crossed and one hand holding an unlit cigar resting on his raised knee. He wore a white suit and black sunglasses, just as he had on his terrace. Only the Panama hat was missing, exposing his full head of snowy hair.

"Shall I translate?" Angela asked.

"Not necessary. Doesn't your father ever light his cigars?"

"No. He only holds them to make that hand look natural. He lost the use of it when the Allies bombed his village during the war."

"That's what I'd heard." He leaned his face close to the screen, then straightened. "Your eyes are younger than mine. Can you read the monogram on his shirt pocket?"

"G.D.," she said after looking. "What did you expect?"

"I wanted to be sure the film wasn't reversed. That happens sometimes, by accident or design. Whenever William Bendix stepped up to the plate in *The Babe Ruth Story,* they reversed the negative so he appeared to bat from the left side, like Ruth. The editors didn't seem to mind that he ran the bases backwards. If the monogram reads all right the film wasn't tampered with."

"What does that have to do with my father?"

When Valentino looked at her, his excitement turned to sympathy. "It means you may have to prepare for the worst."

She parked the little car down the hill from the villa and they got out. It was a clear night; the archivist could scarcely tell where the stars ended and the lights of Florence began. "Do you think you can keep her from slamming the door in your face long enough for me to walk around to the terrace?"

"I can try. Are you sure we shouldn't call the police?"

"With no more than we have to go on, I wouldn't be surprised if Inspector Cabrini fined you and deported me for invading the privacy of Florence's most distinguished citizen."

As she rang the doorbell, he slipped around the corner of the house and waited between two windows, hugging the wall like Cary Grant in *North by Northwest.* When he heard the door open he hurried to the back of the house and stepped onto the terrace.

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It was deserted. He tried the back door. It was locked. He sagged against it, cursing every movie he had seen in which illegal entry was so much more convenient. At that instant a latch turned on the other side with a dry rasp. He scrambled behind a tall planter just as the door opened and Giuseppe Diavolo came out.

Except it wasn't Diavolo.

The man in the white suit whom Valentino had met that afternoon wore neither hat nor glasses. His pink bald head gleamed in the light of the electric lamps flanking the door. He had not a strand of the impressive white hair of the man in the television interview. The film detective was still assimilating that fact when the bald man drew a cigar from an inside pocket and set fire to it with a lighter, using both hands.

Valentino stepped out from behind the planter. "Who are you?" he demanded.

The bald man started and turned. Rapidly his expression changed from shock to recognition to a bluff smile.

"*Signore* Chaplin, is it not? I did not hear Constanza announce you."

"The name is Valentino. And yours is not Diavolo. Who are you?"

He puffed at the cigar, obviously framing an argument. Then he looked at the hand holding the cigar, and from that to the other in which the lighter still rested. At that moment he appeared to shrink in upon himself like a balloon deflating.

The back door banged open and Constanza Diavolo tore out onto the terrace. She was still wearing the maroon velvet dress and her face flushed nearly as dark when she saw the hatless impostor and Valentino standing together. Valentino stepped back involuntarily from the flood of harsh Italian that rushed out at him.

Angela Mondadori appeared in the doorway. "I couldn't hold her any longer." Then she saw the bald man wearing one of her father's white suits. "Who are you?"

"I'm waiting for that answer," Valentino said.

Signora Diavolo added gestures to her diatribe, slashing her sharp-nailed hands at the air. The bald man said something in Italian, then repeated it in a louder voice. She stopped in mid sentence, looked from one face to another, and burst into tears. "Rovina! *Imbecille,* you have ruined me!" She stumbled over to the table beneath the umbrella and collapsed into a chair with her face in her hands.

Valentino told Angela to call the police. She turned to comply.

"Wait!"

Angela turned back. The bald man lowered the hand he had raised, and with it the last vestige of his facade. His eyes were gray and watery. Valentino wondered how he could ever have mistaken this beaten old man for an immortal director.

"My name is Lloyd Bugleman." The accent now was eastern

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American, possibly New Jersey. "I'm an entertainer."

Constanza Diavolo moaned, a heart-rending sound. The film detective ignored her. "Entertain us."

"Believe it or not, I've faced tougher rooms." Bugleman's attempt at humor died in the silence. He cleared his throat. "My impressions didn't go over so well at home, so I came here, where they're not so particular about my Jimmy Cagney. My mother was Italian. She taught me the language."

"She did a good job," Valentino said. "You managed to fool an Italian police official."

"It helps that I look so much like Giuseppe Diavolo. People trust their eyes more than their ears. When Constanza's brother caught my act he was impressed enough to offer me an extended gig for three times what I was making in that ratty little club in the suburbs. All I had to do was study Diavolo's TV interviews, put on the suit, and do my act for visitors who wouldn't go away. He said it was just a job," he added quickly.

"It isn't my brother's fault. Don't blame Roberto."

Angela and Valentino looked at Constanza. She was staring at the flagstones now with her hands limp. There might have been a time when her tears would have added to her fragile beauty. Now they merely made ugly tracks in her heavy makeup.

"Where is my father?" Angela's voice was toneless.

"He died. Two months ago. It was his heart, I think. He went to sleep one night and I could not wake him in the morning."

Valentino said, "Why didn't you call the police?"

"He was dead and cold. There was no use."

"When a man dies, you're supposed to report it," Angela said. She seemed about to say more, but stopped when Constanza raised her head to look at her. She was no longer crying. Her eyes were dead.

"I was born *povero, misero.*" She looked at Valentino. "There is no proper word for it in English; *poor* does not answer. Giuseppe willed this house, this property, everything in it, to the government in Rome. For a museum, he said. He didn't care about me. Only his memory. I could not be *povero* again."

"Where is my father's body?" Angela's voice broke.

"Under these stones. Roberto buried him. Do not blame him. He was only helping his sister." Her eyes came to life, softened. "I am so sorry I did what I had to do to you. You were the one person Bugleman could not have fooled."

Bugleman spread his hands. "They didn't tell me any of this. It was just a gig to me. You'll tell the police I cooperated when I found out."

"Not asking the questions you didn't want to know the answers to doesn't make you innocent." Valentino was cold.

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Angela said, "Constanza is right."

All eyes were on her. She stood framed in the doorway, a tall, beautiful young woman with not a little of her father's presence.

"If my father cared as much for people as he did for his legacy, this would not have happened. I know how it feels to be abandoned through no fault of one's own. I can't punish Constanza for that."

"The authorities have to be told," Valentino said. "If they find out on their own, it will go a lot harder for her."

Angela went over and sank down on one knee beside her stepmother. *"Celluloide's* copyright attorney belongs to a large firm. He'll recommend a good criminal lawyer, as well as a probate attorney who will see that you receive a decent settlement from my father's estate. You were with him almost twenty years. There are laws to protect you."

Constanza shook her head. "I cannot afford lawyers."

"The magazine can. I have backers."

"What's in it for the magazine?" asked Valentino.

"First screening privileges on all the Diavolo films that have been in storage for forty years. That is, if Constanza agrees."

"But I do not own them."

"That will be the settlement."

Her stepmother's face filled with wonder. In that moment she looked no older than Angela. "I do not go to *il penitenzario?"*

"I'm the daughter, and the injured party. I'll testify on your behalf. You may have to pay a fine for improper disposal of a body." Angela made a wry face at Valentino. "We can introduce a respected historian from America as a character witness. I think the donation of a print of *L'enfanti del Inferno* to the UCLA archives would be an appropriate gesture of gratitude."

Valentino said, "She's the finest woman I've ever known."

Angela stood and helped Constanza to her feet. The two women went into the house, one supporting the other with an arm across her back. Valentino and Lloyd Bugleman were left alone on the terrace. The entertainer relit his cigar, the flame shaking. He took a puff and let it out with a shudder. "So what happens to me?"

"Back to the ratty little club."

He nodded. Then he narrowed his eyes. "I thought I had my act down cold. What tipped you off?"

"The cigar. You held it in your left hand. It was Diavolo's right that was paralyzed. The cigar was a prop to discourage people from grabbing and shaking it."

Bugleman looked down at his hands. "Constanza told me about that in the beginning. I tried to make the switch, but it just didn't feel right after all those weeks onstage. I didn't think anyone would notice."

"Next time, don't rehearse in front of a mirror," Valentino said. ●

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Art by June Levine

SPINNING

by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Midway through that first awful class—when the clock above the mirrors said she had only been on the stationary bike for twenty-two minutes, but her body told her she had been on it for 2.2 days, when she thought her heart was going to burst through her chest like a creature out of the movie *Alien,* when sweat poured off her in rivers, and her breath came in deep honking gasps—midway through all of that, Patricia bent her head, saw the flab on her thighs go up while her actual legs went down, and heard Tom, her instructor, call over the rock music:

"Good. Real good. Excellent. Keep going. Wonderful. Hmmm. You'll get it. Relax. Wait until it feels good. Good. Relax. . . ."

Something in the rhythm of his voice, in the involuntary nature of the sounds, told her he would sound like this in bed. He would talk, his words meaningless, an accompaniment to the beat his body had established, and the pattern would continue building, building, building, until his voice rose in a cry and everything stopped.

She focused on that, held onto that, because it felt like the only

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thing that made him real somehow, made him, this Greek god of a man, whose muscles were perfectly sculpted, whose eyes were warm and brown and not quite sympathetic enough, slightly less intimidating. And she needed a reason not to be intimidated.

Two hundred pounds did not fit on her delicate five-four frame. She didn't know how she had let herself go like this. Excuse after excuse, she supposed, a sense of denial, a willingness to believe, at first, that it was her clothes that were shrinking not her body that was expanding. It had taken two years of failed exercise attempts to bring her to this class, to this moment, and she had been planning to drop out of this one too until he fell into his unconscious personal rhythm and she realized that he too was human.

Writers who are very prolific or who work in several different genres often employ pen names to give their various lines of work distinct identities. Kristine Kathryn Rusch is both prolific and proficient in many genres. She and her mystery publisher, St. Martin's Press, have therefore decided to bring out her new mystery novels under the pseudonym Kris Nelscott. The first book to bear that name, *A Dangerous Road*, will appear in summer 2000.

And then she looked up, saw those not-quite-sympathetic eyes fall on her with something like disgust. She knew how she looked. The gym had thoughtfully provided a mirror in its exercise room. She saw the five other women in the spinning class: the darling with her tight, sculpted, twenty-five-year-old body who made it clear that she had never tried this before, and who was so in shape that she managed all the motions with ease; the middle-aged housewives in the middle, looking fine to her, but complaining about that extra ten pounds they always put on in the holidays; the bartender, an older woman who looked strong and solid, who had told Patricia about the class; and the anorexic creature beside Patricia who was having just as much trouble keeping up—apparently her eating habits, like Patricia's, robbed her of the strength to exercise. But none of them looked as disgusting as she did in her sweats, her face red, her new perm damp, her body straining. Why was it that she, a woman who had to struggle to walk across the room, was being treated like the pariah, when she was the one who needed the most courage, the most strength, to be here?

It was because the others were all afraid that some day, somehow, through the same careless inattentiveness that she had shown, they would all end up looking like her.

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But *he,* he had no right to look at her that way. He was supposed to be the professional, the one who helped people like her become hard bodies like him. He wasn't supposed to let her see that she disgusted him, even though she did.

It was that look, in combination with her realization about him, that gave her the determination she had lacked. As her legs went round and round, the stationary bike's resistance on its lowest setting, she realized that she now had a goal.

She had been pretty once, eighty pounds and fifteen years ago. She would be pretty again.

And when she was, he would want her. She would take him to bed, and she would find out if he really sounded like that. And if he did, she would look at him with the same disgust she had seen in his eyes only moments before. She would look at him, and she would laugh.

Meeting her goal was harder than she thought it would be. After her first spinning class, she had to go immediately to bed, and when she got up the next morning, her legs ached so badly that she could barely climb stairs. Over time, she grew used to the class, and she moved onto weights, treadmills, and aerobics.

Within six months, she had lost thirty pounds and her body had definition. The spinning classes were tedious—she had learned the pattern within a few days and knew what he would call out next—and she found herself waiting for a repetition of the moment, the moment that had inspired her. It didn't happen often, and she watched him now. He would catch himself, as if he did know how he sounded, and sometimes, he would catch her looking at him.

She always smiled. She tried to be as congenial as she could.

Fortunately, she didn't have to be congenial anywhere else. She was having trouble being pleasant. The exercise put her in a good mood for an hour or two afterward, but the exhaustion that came with it angered her. She went back to her family doctor, wondering if the exercise was hurting her (even though he claimed, up front, that it would be the best thing for her) and he had calmly, patiently explained how the human body worked.

She got a sense that he gave this explanation a lot. *You are carrying the weight of a 12-year-old girl in addition to your own body weight. It is as if you are doing these exercises for two, when everyone else in the room is doing them for one.*

She wished she could explain it to them. The looks had stopped, after her second month, except when newcomers entered the gym. Then they stared at her as if she were the freak, or the one that would fail, and eventually, they would disappear.

She remained, tenacious to the last.

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It was at her job, another twenty pounds later, that she realized she was in a revenge cycle. She worked as a Web-site designer for a local Internet provider. Her brother was her boss, and he would interview the customer on tape, and she would listen to the interview, use the materials, and design the Web site from there.

In the past two weeks, clients who came to the office (and there were so few of them: most of them as lonely as she was) began to compliment her on her looks. She did look better. The loss of fifty pounds had also taken ten years off her face. The exercise and all the water it forced her to drink had cleared up her skin, and the pretty girl she remembered was beginning to make appearances in her mirror.

The office was a tiny place—a three-room suite with a door opening onto a strip-mall sidewalk—that became even tinier whenever someone new came inside. The wallpaper-thin walls did not shut out any sound, so she usually heard her brother's interviews with potential Web site clients twice. Those she didn't mind, because she made notes, hearing different things on the first and second listenings. It was the casual conversations, the folks who dropped in just to update their accounts or to gossip with her brother or to see, lately, how different Patricia was looking, that got on her nerves.

She had taken to closing her presswood door and opening the window that overlooked the alley, no matter how cold it was. Sometimes, if she did that, she could focus on the whoosh of traffic on the highway, the crunch of wheels on the gravel, the occasional conversations of people entering other businesses. If she was really lucky, it all became white noise, a sort of background to the tap-tap-tap of her fingers on the keys, her mind not in Seavy Village, but inside the computer, in that vast and somewhat mysterious network of computers known as the Internet. There she could float, be someone else, anyone else, and no one seemed to care that she was different except herself.

It was in one of those moments when, on a whim, she took the quiz the local psychiatrist had asked her to put on his Web site. His self-help book, *Negative Thoughts and How to Cure Them,* had been climbing the bestseller list, and he believed he needed a way for his fans to contact him. He thought the quiz was an open door. She hadn't been too sure, but then, she hadn't been too sure about his book either, which seemed to her (when she read it) a '90s ripoff of Napoleon Hill's classic *Think and Grow Rich.* But she, like the suckers she was designing the page for, took the quiz, and as she read the paragraph summary of her answers, she saw herself in its analysis:

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You have a tendency to blame others for your problems. Instead of solving those problems, you hope that others suffer worse than you have. Sometimes you fantasize about causing the suffering yourself. This is not healthy behavior. For a solution, see page sixty-two in my book . . .

And because she had already committed herself that far, she looked up page sixty-two in the complementary copy of the book that the psychiatrist had given the office and saw the chapter heading in bold: *The Revenge Cycle: Explanations of Your Obsession and How to Cure It.*

Surprisingly, the advice made sense to her. She had focused—obsessed—on Tom, on the sound of his voice, on the revenge she would get once she had sex with him and, more important, had laughed at him. Had humiliated him with her voice and her eyes and the body she had sculpted for just that purpose.

After reading the chapter, she stood up behind her desk and ran her hands down her arms, feeling the skin beneath her cotton blouse. The skin and the muscle and the bone. She hadn't felt bone in years, the sharpness of her elbows, the two bumps on either side of her wrists. She was beginning to like this new self, beginning to accept that it, and not the woman whose thighs brushed together, was who she was.

If she ended her focus on Tom, perhaps the exercise would end too. After all, the book said that all behaviors relating to the revenge cycle had to stop in order for it to be cured.

The only behaviors she had were the good ones: the exercise, the healthy food, the grooming that she had only recently started to do again. Clothes looked good once more. Makeup made her seem older and more mysterious rather than a woman denying her encroaching middle age.

As revenge fantasies went, this was a fairly harmless one. Perhaps she might dent Tom's rather solid self-esteem. Perhaps she might even make him reconsider casual affairs. But those two things might be good for him.

They would certainly be good for her.

It felt, when she looked on that moment later, as if for one brief afternoon she surfaced from her own thoughts, had a sense of clarity, and then dove back in, like a whale coming to the surface of water to take a breath.

She didn't take another breath for a very long time.

At the end of eighteen months, she thought of spinning class as hell. But she hit her ideal weight that month, and actually came to the class in spandex that made her look athletic and not like she had squeezed her bulk into someone else's clothes. As she

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went through her first class at her perfect weight, she listened for the moment when Tom's voice rose, when it punctuated each word with a gasping sexual rhythm, and when it did, she looked at him and found him looking at her.

The not-quite-sympathetic expression had left his eyes a long time ago, replaced by a kind of pride. She actually overheard him talking about her to the aerobics instructor, using her as an example of how well spinning worked. She studied him as her legs worked—thighs like steel now, muscles rippling beneath hard skin—and then, slowly, she smiled.

She had been saving her smiles. They had been her best feature even when she was heavy, and she had rationed them, at least for him. She wanted to use them when she was in peak condition, knowing that he would be attracted not so much to her face as to her sculpted form. And so, as their eyes met and the smile creased her face, she saw something new. She saw his eyebrows rise briefly and knew that small movement for something she hadn't seen in years.

Flirting.

She raised her eyebrows in return, and then looked away. First salvo sent and received. Mating dance initiated. Humiliation about to begin.

She went home that night happy for the first time since she had started taking spinning classes. In her two-room apartment whose ocean view was the only thing to recommend it, she danced a small jig, and then smiled again.

Her plan would actually work.

She didn't know what would happen after she slept with him. That was the problem she was working on as she drove to the gym in her beloved 1974 Volkswagen Bug. It smelled of oil and it vibrated crazily, but she had owned that car since she bought it used in high school and it had been the one thing she had maintained through all the years.

Her job at the i.p. had begun to pay her real money and she could buy a good car for the first time in her life, but she didn't. She couldn't give up her faithful Bug. She never would. She did her best thinking in it. And as she drove up the hill to the gym, she needed a goal that would last her past her revenge on Tom. And, if she were going to be truly healthy, it had to be one that did not continue to play out her revenge fantasy.

She parked in her usual space, grabbed her gym bag, and got out, startled to see a police car parked beside the bicycle racks. In the two years she had been coming here, she had never seen a police car. But there was that one month when a paramedic tried to fit exercise into his schedule. Sometimes he parked an ambulance outside. That had unnerved her the first time as well.

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She pushed her car door shut with her hip, walked around the police car, and headed down the flight of stairs to the club itself. There she saw two policemen at the front desk and the aerobics instructor, a petite thing with too much energy for a human being, sitting on a stool looking stricken. No one was on the machines, and even the hardcore gym rats who spent hours on the free weights were huddled near the Nautilus equipment. From there, any conversation at the front desk could be heard loud and clear.

Patricia opened the glass door and came inside. She walked to the desk like she always did, to sign in and pay the extra fee for her special class, when a look from one of the policemen stopped her. The aerobics instructor, whose name she had never learned, raised liquid brown eyes filled with tears.

"There's no class," she said in a shaky voice. "Tom is dead."

The words circled in her head like the wheels on the stationary bike. *Tom. Is. Dead.* He couldn't be dead. She wasn't finished yet. She hadn't had the answer to her question, she hadn't been able to look at him with not-quite-sympathy in her eyes.

The police were watching her reaction. And she looked at them, truly seeing them for the first time. The man closest to her was about her age, fifty pounds overweight and carrying it all in the danger zone around his stomach. The other man was younger, athletic, broad-shouldered. His blue eyes were sharp, his lips thin. He didn't seem to miss anything. Especially the expression that must have crossed her face. What had it looked like? Shock? Disappointment? Fear?

For her first response, after that flash of what-about-me?, was guilt. She could have done it. She *had* done it, a thousand times, in her mind. Not killed him physically, but emotionally. Somehow she thought her contempt would destroy him.

Arrogant, of course, but arrogance was what got her through.

The younger officer stepped forward. "Did you know Tom Ansara?"

Not well enough to know his last name. Maybe not at all. "I saw him three times a week," she said. "But I didn't know him. He instructed my spinning class."

But she had a hunch about how he sounded in bed. It felt as if she had been intimate with him. It felt as if she had lost someone close.

She wanted to put her hand on the wall, on the chair, to use something for support.

Those sharp blue cop eyes watched her, seeing everything. How good an actress was she? She didn't know. Good, she hoped. Good enough.

"And you are?"

"Patricia," she said, giving her first name only, as she always did at the gym. Only after a moment, she added, "Taylor. Patricia Taylor."

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With that little pause in there, her last name sounded made up, even to her. She fumbled with her purse. "I have ID."

"No need," the cop said. "Just wait with the others."

She carried her gym bag and her coat to the nearest table, littered with out-of-date health and fitness magazines. In her eighteen months at the gym, she had never sat here. She had never spent any time sitting on anything that didn't spin or move or have weights attached.

The gym seemed excessively silent. The usual loud rock-and-roll music had been turned off. Someone had muted all three television sets. A fan whirred in the corner, set to cool whoever had been on the Precor cross-training machine, but that person had been off the machine for so long that the digitized program was running on the computer screen. In the long mirror lining one wall she could see the racquetball bleachers. The Thursday night wallyball players were seated there, heads bowed, hands threaded and hanging over their knees.

No one spoke. It was as if the cops were playing Agatha Christie, waiting until all the suspects arrived before going through the list and coming up with the killer.

The other members of the spinning class threaded in: the darling, the middle-aged housewives, and the bartender. One by one they all took seats at the table, as if united in the class that no longer existed. The anorexic had given up long ago and had been replaced by the only man, an accountant with a hairy back and a tendency to take off his shirt at precisely thirty-three minutes into the session. In street clothes, he looked diminished and not at all like a man who wore a white muscle T and baggy gym shorts cut one size too small.

The aerobics instructor sobbed her line each time a class member entered, as if she were a model trying out for a play. The shock seemed similar for all of them. Only the darling asked if it was all right if she exercised while she waited. The incredulous silence that greeted her question was her answer, and even she realized that she had said something wrong.

The clock above the mirror showed that forty-five minutes had passed since Patricia arrived. On a normal night, she would be sweating through the last fifteen minutes of the routine, wondering if he would forget himself again and provide her with enough ammunition to survive another week. Instead, she was sitting as still as she possibly could in a white plastic chair, wondering if the police meant to hold them all night.

Clearly Tom's death was suspicious, and clearly it involved people from the gym. Unless he had no other life but the gym. It surprised her to realize that she knew nothing about him, not really. She hadn't even figured out which car in the parking lot was his. She had been able to tell, from the way he spoke in class, that he

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rode his bicycle a lot outdoors: He knew the coast highway from a rider's perspective—sometimes using actual examples for his class to imagine: *We're going to do an uphill climb. Increase the tension on the bike when I tell you. Pretend this is Cascade Head. Know how good you'll feel when you reach the top.*

She also knew that he preferred jazz to rock-and-roll, but that the darling had requested peppier music to ride to. Patricia actually missed the Al Jarreau mixed with Branford Marsalis. It had provided a great middle period to the class.

When the spinning hour was up, and all the regulars had come in, the heavyset cop told the aerobics instructor to put a Closed sign on the door and lock it. Then they took people one by one into the manager's office and asked questions.

The heavyset cop remained out front mostly, to deter conversation, Patricia supposed. He watched them all too closely too, and the mirrors didn't help. They allowed him to see everything in that large exercise area, the slightest gesture, the smallest twitch.

After people spoke to the blue-eyed cop in the office, they were allowed to leave. Exercisers were interviewed in the order in which they'd arrived. Obviously someone had kept very careful track.

What it meant was that by the time Patricia was called, the gym rats were gone, but most of the class remained. The aerobics instructor had called her boss, and he had come down to lock up. Patricia also got a sense that he wanted to speak to the police himself.

When the heavyset cop said her name, Patricia got up, legs wobbly. She almost forgot her purse and gym bag, and grabbed them as an afterthought. Then she walked past the mirrors to the office where she had only been one time: the day she had signed up. That day she had been carrying an extra eighty pounds and even though she had dressed to hide it, it had been painfully obvious in the small room.

This time, the room's contours seemed more suited to her frame. The blue-eyed cop closed the door, asked her if she minded if the conversation was recorded, and then asked her to sit.

"This is just routine," he said.

It didn't seem routine, but she didn't say that. She had promised herself out front that she would volunteer nothing, and if he spent more than five minutes asking questions—the average time he had spent with the others—she would call an attorney just on principle.

"How well did you know Tom Ansara, Ms. Taylor?" The cop sat behind the messy manager's desk and folded his hands on top of a pile of papers that clearly didn't belong to him. His blue eyes seemed even more intense in the small space.

"He was my spinning instructor."

"For how long?"

"Eighteen months."

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"You know that number precisely?"

She nodded. "I started my exercise program with his class."

"Was it effective?"

"The program?"

"The class."

She shrugged. "It motivated me."

"I understand you lost a lot of weight due to Mr. Ansara."

She almost choked. She felt a flush climb up her neck, her face, and she couldn't stop it. It was as if this man, this cop, had seen into her mind, had read each secret thought, knew how Tom had inspired her.

Knew about the revenge.

"I don't know if you can blame Tom," she said at last.

Blue-eyes raised his eyebrows ever so slightly. The expression gave his face a warmth it hadn't had before. "Blame? I would think you'd be proud of the loss."

"I am," she said, and almost repeated "*I* am." But she didn't. She wasn't going to give anything.

"And Tom helped you."

"The spinning class helped me." The flush had receded from her cheeks. Now her skin was cold. She wondered if she had turned pale, and how he would read this.

"You haven't asked what happened to Tom."

"I figured you would tell me."

He studied her for a moment. "He's still in the workout room. Would you like to take a look?"

"God no!" The response came out of her mouth before she could stop it. What was this man thinking, offering her the chance to look at a dead body? Not just any dead body, but the dead body of a man she had known, and fantasized about, however inappropriately.

"How tall are you, Ms. Taylor?"

The question so startled her that she had to think before responding. "Five-four." How did that relate to Tom's death? How did any of it?

She had forgotten to look at the clock, and now she was afraid to, afraid it would seem insensitive, afraid it would make her even more suspicious than she probably already was.

"All right," he said. "We're done."

She remained sitting for a moment, disoriented, as he probably wanted her to be. She opened her mouth once, then closed it.

"Although," he said, "you should probably tell me how to get ahold of you. I'm sure it's here in the gym's records, but it's easier if you tell me."

She did. She told him her work phone and her home phone, and even what hours she would be in both places. He gave her a business card with his name on it. She didn't know policemen had

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business cards, but apparently they did. This one had the city's symbol on it, and then "Detective David Huckleby." It was such a jokey name, a rural cop name, that in any other context, she would have smiled.

Instead she pocketed the card and stood. He stood too, came up beside her so that he could open the door.

As he reached for the knob, she said, "You still didn't tell me how Tom died."

"I didn't?" He let go of the knob. "Careless of me." When it hadn't been at all. He had wanted her to ask. He had confused her, disoriented her, and then wondered if she would remember to ask. She knew that much. It was some kind of game. Maybe she should have called a lawyer after all.

"Tom's neck was broken, Ms. Taylor," Detective Huckleby said. "We think someone wrapped an arm around his neck and snapped it."

He paused, watching her face. She felt her heart beating hard. She couldn't picture it. She couldn't picture someone grabbing Tom like that.

"You know the grip," Huckleby said. "It's the one they teach in the self-defense classes here."

She had taken one of those classes just the month before. The instructor had been from out of town, a burly man who taught self-defense all over the country. He had used her as his model victim. She had stood in front of the class, felt his fingers on her neck as he positioned her, then remained very still while his arm encircled her throat. With a sharp movement of the forearm, and a backward pull on the hair, he had said, a neck could be broken, snapped, in a heartbeat.

She hadn't known why anyone would want this information. But the class had been in self-defense. And sometimes, she knew from her television-watching experience, self-defense meant only one person got out alive.

Huckleby was watching her, waiting for her reaction. He had known she had been in the class. He had obviously seen the sign-up list.

He touched her arm, felt her biceps, the muscle clearly developed beneath a thin layer of skin. His touch was gentle and, if she hadn't been in such a state of heightened awareness, she would have thought it accidental.

"Will you miss him?" Huckleby asked.

Her mouth was dry. The feeling of guilt had grown stronger. "I'll miss his class," she said. It was the only thing she could tell him. It was the only truth she knew.

"What a sad epitaph for a man you've known for eighteen months, a man who was proud of helping you lose weight."

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"I didn't know him," she said, hearing as she spoke how defensive the words sounded. "I just took a class from him."

"I hear he had a thing for pretty women."

She laughed without mirth. It was an involuntary reaction, one that had become habitual over all the years, all the weight. "That wouldn't have included me."

"It does now," Huckleby said softly.

She felt the smile, the inappropriate smile, leave her face. "I was obese when I came into his class," she said. "I couldn't even pedal the damn bike with the resistance turned off for more than thirty seconds at a stretch. Then I'd pant for five minutes and try again."

"Tenacity can be attractive."

"Maybe," she said. "But you don't forget how someone looked when you met them."

You don't forget that not-quite-sympathetic look in the eye, the disgust when he thought no one was looking. You don't forget any of that.

She thought those last two sentences, but had enough self-control to prevent them from coming out of her mouth.

"I don't think you know how far you've come, Ms. Taylor," Huckleby said softly.

"Oh, I do," she said. "And Tom knew it too." She glanced at the door. "Can I go now?"

His smile was gentle. If she had met him in other circumstances, she might even have thought it kind. "Sure."

She let herself out and glanced at the clock. She had been in there twenty minutes. So much for proper resolutions.

"Ms. Taylor?"

She turned. He was holding her purse and gym bag. She swallowed. "Thanks," she said, taking them from him. She bent her head and walked to the door. The gym's owner, a muscular man who looked as if he spent too much time on the bench press, let her out. She took the stairs slowly, thinking as she did so that she would never hear Tom again, never hear that odd hitch in his voice, the way it caught when he got into the rhythm of the workout, the way it soared above the music.

His body was on the floor of the exercise room, his neck tilted at an odd angle. She wondered what he looked like, if he still seemed like a Greek god, even in his death repose. And then she shuddered. She would never be able to go in that room again.

She put her bag and purse in the car, and locked it. Then she took off at a run down the parking lot, not because she was frightened but because she needed to burn off the fear she had felt.

She needed the exercise, and she had to prove to herself that she could do it without Tom.

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She woke in the middle of the night with an ache in her heart and tears in her eyes. She wanted a piece of chocolate cake so badly that it hurt. Fortunately, she lived in a small town that didn't have an all-night grocery store, and she didn't keep cake mixes in her small apartment.

Comfort food. She wanted comfort food because she needed comforting.

She heard her own voice, speaking to Huckleby: *I didn't know him. I just took a class from him.*

But if it were that simple, why couldn't she sleep? Her mother hadn't been able to sleep in the first few months after her father died. Neither had she, if the truth be told. The brain was busy trying to process the loss. Too busy to sleep more than a few hours at a time.

That had been when she put on the serious weight. Chocolate cake in the middle of the night, topped with vanilla ice cream. Or Cool Whip. Or Hershey's syrup.

Her mouth watered. She needed something comforting. Now. Never deny the cravings, she knew that much. But she couldn't afford to fall back into bad habits just because her spinning-class instructor was dead.

She wondered what the local best-selling psychiatrist would say about this. Probably recommend therapy. Probably report her to the police. She could hear it now: *She had a revenge fantasy about the man. Perhaps she acted it out. Perhaps she stalked him.*

She sat down at the kitchen table she had bought at a discount furniture store and assembled herself, then put her hands in her short-cropped hair. If she were honest with herself, she knew that she could have killed him. If her revenge fantasy had taken a different, more harmful twist. If she had gotten to the acting-out stage—which she had. She had been planning to come in that night, to continue the seduction. She had heard how willing he was to date women at the club. She had known about his preference for the sleek muscular women, the clear athletes. She had planned to use that to her benefit.

And the cop had seen it. He had seen it, and something about her height made him dismiss her.

But he shouldn't have. Patricia hadn't seen the body, but she knew the room, and she knew one thing: Tom liked to sit on the floor and talk to people. She could imagine how someone like her could have killed him:

He would have been sitting cross-legged on the polished wood floor in the center of the room, holding forth on the value of good nutrition or how so many reps burn so much fat, when someone came up behind him, put him in the stranglehold, and pulled until he couldn't breathe. Then he fell back, sprawling across the floor,

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his neck bent at the odd angle. Simple. Easy. So simple and easy even a short person could have done it.

She wished she could mention that to Huckleby without raising suspicion, but she couldn't. All she could do was listen for the gossip, read the local papers, and pretend that Tom's death had no effect on her life.

Like a woman who had just fallen off a horse, she made herself go to the gym the following night. Getting back in the saddle, she had whispered to herself, and while that wasn't entirely accurate, it was good enough.

The owner sat behind the desk, paperwork spread in front of him. A big sign, written in black Magic Marker, announced that all classes had been canceled until further notice. He saw her stare at it, and said, "We can't have the room until the investigation's done."

She wasn't sure if that was supposed to make her feel better or worse, so she just nodded and went into the locker room to change. Another woman was standing near the row of sinks, reading a sign newly taped to the wall. The sign was computer generated and it mentioned a trust fund, set up by the gym, for Tom Ansara's daughter.

Patricia felt a jolt. "I didn't know he had a daughter."

The woman nodded. Patricia had seen her around, but had never bothered to learn her name. "Sixteen. She's being raised by the mother in Seattle. But he was here, trying to earn money for her college. Now she may never go."

Patricia almost asked what happened to scholarships, but thought that too crass. Instead she made a sympathetic noise and changed into her sweats. She went into the gym proper and used the newest StairMaster set on high for an hour, until sweat poured off her. While she worked out, she noticed that only the regulars were here. The dilettantes, the ones who showed up every January or once a month or after a particularly big meal, hadn't come at all. And that was unusual. Every night usually had one.

As she marched up and down a make-believe flight of stairs, she was conscious of the room behind her, hidden by a row of racquetball courts and bleachers, now cordoned off by the local police. The more she marched and sweated, the more she focused on that room. She wanted to see it, wanted to know, perhaps, if he were really dead.

The room had mirrors covering three walls and a row of windows covering the fourth. The windows overlooked the free-weight area. When she got off the StairMaster and grabbed her sweat towel, wrapping it around her neck, she meandered into the free-weight area as if her movement were part of her routine.

The windows showed a darkened room, lit only by the lights reflected in the mirrors. There was no chalk outline of a body on the

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floor—she had read somewhere that Hollywood made that up and the police never used it; she just hadn't believed it to be true—and the special spinning bikes were lined up against the back wall, just like usual, waiting for class members to wheel them toward the middle. Beside them were the pile of step mats, and next to that the boxy audio system that had threatened to ruin her hearing.

Nothing was different except the yellow police tape covering the door, and the sign attached: *Closed by Order of the Seavy Village Police.* She shuddered, wishing, somehow, that she had never heard about his death. That she had stayed away as her weight came down, and when she came back and forgot to ask about Tom, people forgot to tell her about the murder, so that she would assume he had moved away, or lost his job, or found employment that required use of his mind. But she couldn't pretend those things in retrospect, and she couldn't drop the disappointment she felt that, somehow, she had been cheated of something.

"Any clues?" A male voice behind her made her jump.

She turned. Detective Huckleby was standing so close to her that he almost pressed her against the window.

"No," she said.

"Strange," he said. "A room is always a room, even after something awful happens in it. Unless you know, the room is no different."

She had had that thought before. Apartments and hotel rooms always made her wonder, when she first arrived, if anyone had died in them. She had always thought she would be able to tell by some subtle vibration, something that had altered because of the death.

But she felt no such vibration from the gym, none from the exercise room at all, and she was surprised.

"I didn't think any of the class members would show up tonight," he said.

"I didn't just go to class," she said. "This is my routine."

"Routine." He spoke softly, as if he were musing.

Her heart had started to pound again. "I lost my weight, Detective, through exercise. I have to continue that, particularly now—"

"Now that your instructor is dead?"

She nodded.

"So he did have an influence on your weight loss."

She licked her lips. "He inspired me." That much was true.

"Who's going to inspire you now?"

She met his gaze. Electric blue. Neon blue. Like she imagined Paul Newman's eyes would be in person. "I guess I have to," she said.

"Always tough," he said. "It's always better if the motivation comes from the outside."

She wasn't sure if he was speaking of exercise now, or if he was speaking of murder. Would he be happier if the killer came from

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outside Seavy Village? Or outside the gym? She swallowed. She had been so focused on herself, on Tom's death, that she hadn't thought about the reality of murder. The fact that a murder victim had to have a murderer.

"Are you done with your exercise?" he asked.

"Do you want to interrogate me again?"

To her surprise, he laughed. "If you thought that was an interrogation," he said, "I don't want to put you through a real one."

She saw no humor in it. Yesterday had been a bad day, a day she did not want to repeat.

He must have seen that on her face, for his smile faded. "Sorry," he said. "You're not a suspect."

"At this time," she said.

He half shrugged. "I suppose." He looked around at the empty bleachers, the slouching owner poring over the papers behind the reception desk. "I was hoping to buy you coffee and ask a few questions about the gym."

"Me?"

He faced her, his eyes meeting hers. "Well," he said, "actually, anyone from the class who bothered to show up tonight. You're the only one."

"I thought you didn't expect any of us to show up tonight."

"I figured it would only be the exercise addicts."

It was her turn to smile, ruefully. "It is."

He nodded once. "Coffee?"

"Water or Gatorade. Coffee's a diuretic."

"Hmm," he said. "And that's bad?"

She looked at him, uncertain if that was a real joke. She supposed it was. It seemed strange to joke in front of a room where a man had been murdered.

"There's a deli and juice bar upstairs," she said, not sure why she'd agreed.

"Lead the way," he said.

"Let me change," she said. "I'll meet you there."

"I suppose you want carrot juice."

"Actually," she said, "I want bottled water. And maybe an apple."

"Done."

She pushed past him and went to the lady's locker room. Her hands were shaking and she was wondering what she was doing. He was a cop investigating a murder and he wanted to talk to her a second time, informally. She felt as if she were doing something wrong, as if she should get on the phone and ask for a lawyer or not show up or go upstairs and ask what he was charging her with. But all of that seemed melodramatic and unnecessary and a bit rude.

After a quick—very quick—shower, she put on her street clothes—a cheap cotton sweater and a pair of faded jeans. She left

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her tennies on, and kept her gym bag in the locker. She saw no reason to spend too much time with him.

The restaurant upstairs had gone through many formats in the eighteen months she had worked out in the gym. The first and most appalling had been the steak joint that served its meat thick and charbroiled. The next had been a vegetarian restaurant with poorly made, tasteless 1970s cuisine. Three different taverns came in after that, and now, finally, the deli, with its smoothies and juice bars. This new place was the only one that got the regulars from the gym. Sometimes they ran up the stairs, got a small sandwich and a fruit drink, and then went back down to work out some more.

She had come up more than once with a novel, usually science fiction, and had eaten alone, most often the taco deli sandwich made with fat-free refried beans. It had flavor, and it was filling, and it didn't have a lot of calories, all of which counted in its favor. The seats were comfortable, and the staff congenial, never asking her to move when she finished her meal.

Now she went up to find herself and Huckleby the only customers. The lights were out in the far section of the deli, and a single employee, an older woman whom Patricia had never seen before, cleaned behind the counter.

A bottled water and the fruit plate waited for her. Huckleby had a cup of coffee and a shortbread cookie.

"That's a lot of food."

"You looked like you could use it."

How many years had she waited for someone to say that, only to find it was someone she didn't want to impress. She slipped into the chair and opened the bottle of water.

"You had questions."

He nodded. "Tell me what you can about Tom."

"We had this conversation yesterday."

"Yesterday I knew less than I do today."

"Oh?" She took a long sip. She had been thirsty, which meant she had let herself get dehydrated. Careless of her.

"Yeah," he said.

"Like what?"

He broke the shortbread cookie in half, then broke a half into smaller pieces. "No," he said. "I get to ask the questions first."

"I already told you about Tom."

"You told me what you know. And that was official. Now I want to know what you suspect."

Suspect. Strange word. Was she supposed to tell this man that she thought Tom Ansara was self-involved and rather stupid, that he had an eye for pretty women and no real empathy for anyone who didn't look like a perfect match for him? Or should she tell him about her suspicions of Tom's performance in bed?

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"I think he biked a lot," she said.

Huckleby raised an amused eyebrow. "Gee. We missed that."

She felt color rise in her cheeks. "No," she said. "I mean biked all over the city, maybe over the area."

"That's not gossip."

"You want gossip?"

"Yes."

"Talk to the aerobics instructor then. She collects it."

He leaned back and studied her. "That was harsh. You don't like her?"

"I don't know her."

"It amazes me that you could come to a gym for eighteen months and not know anyone."

"I came to work out."

"People usually make friends in places like this."

"Not with fat people."

"Why? They make friends with fat people everywhere else."

She picked up her fork and stabbed an orange slice with it, feeling a momentary victory when some of the juice shot across the table toward him. "I understand it," she said. "At least I do now. Most people who are more than twenty pounds overweight don't stay. It has nothing to do with discipline and everything to do with effort. It takes a lot of effort to move a normal weight, but add extra weight on top of it and a fat person is working twice, sometimes three times as hard as everyone else. Most can't manage it, and they leave."

"So you don't make friends with fat people at the gym either?"

"I thought we already established that I don't make friends," she said.

His gaze seemed a little too sharp for a moment, as if her admission was an admission to something else as well. "I'm sure you do in your personal life."

She had a few friends, people she talked to, but no one she confided in. She hadn't confided in anyone for a very long time. Not even her brother. They talked about casual things. She supposed that counted as friendship.

And she had a lot of acquaintances on-line. She kept a board running behind her work at all times, and answered her e-mail when it showed up. She closed out her nightly sessions in a chat room, each night a room devoted to a different subject, just to keep her mind active.

The silence between them had grown. Finally, she said, "I thought you wanted to hear about Tom."

"And I thought you didn't gossip."

She ate the orange slice. It was sour. She took a sip of water to cover the taste. "I discovered in the last twenty-four hours how

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little I knew about him. Like the daughter."

"There is no daughter," Huckleby said.

She set the bottle of water down very deliberately. "But the sign—"

"He told people there was a daughter, and the very kind folks in Seavy Village have started a fund. But I investigated, and I can tell you, there is no daughter. No ex-wife. No acrimonious divorce. There isn't even a Tom Ansara until he came to Seavy Village."

So there was more to this than just the gym. That relieved her somehow, made the thought of murder caused by people who frequented her safe place go away.

"All of his relationships lasted a few weeks at most," Huckleby said, "so consider yourself lucky he didn't make a pass at you."

Such a quaint old-fashioned phrase "make a pass" was. She almost smiled. But a part of her brain, the suspicious part, remained distant.

"Why are you telling me all this?"

"Because," he said, "I figured if I opened up, you would. And you look like a lady who has something to get off her chest."

She felt her eyes widen and wished she could stop them, wished she had more control than she did. Now, when she lied, he would know it. "I've told you everything I can," she said.

He stared at her for a moment. "Pity."

"I don't hold any keys," she said. "I'd tell you if I did."

"Would you?" he asked, then dropped a ten on the table and stood. By the time she got to her feet, he was gone.

All that night and as she ate her solitary bowl of cereal the next morning, she kept telling herself that it was silly to feel like she was failing Huckleby somehow. She didn't even know him, didn't know anything about him. All she knew was that he wanted information on Tom's death, and she had none.

In fact, she had even less than she had had before. She had believed the stories about Tom around the gym, had thought him a divorced man with a conventional past. Now, perhaps, he didn't have one, and he, not the murderer, had violated the safety of the gym, of Seavy Village itself.

Blaming the victim, they called it. But she knew that things were never as clear-cut as they seemed. Apparently, so did Huckleby.

When she got to work, her schedule was light: some routine maintenance of a few sites and monitoring of a few others. She opened the usual chat room where she hung out when things were slow, but couldn't concentrate.

Her brother was in his office, talking loudly on the phone. He wanted to expand their service beyond the coast, to move into the valley. It would entail hiring additional staff, getting more lines,

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working more computers. It would be a nightmare for her, but so far she hadn't tried to talk him out of it.

Rather than listen to him argue with another of his friends over his plans, she opened her window. The morning breeze smelled of sea salt and fish. It was cold, but she didn't mind. She needed something else to concentrate on.

But her attention kept wandering back to Huckleby's words about Tom, about his secrets, and she finally succumbed. She knew where he lived: She had followed him there once, early on, so that she could have a setting to imagine her revenge. Actually sitting in her car on that cold November night, watching him shaded against his window as he moved through his apartment, made her feel like a voyeur, a stalker, something she didn't want to be. So, even though she'd felt an urge to follow him at other times, she never had.

Still, she decided to use his name and address now to access his driver's license. Some schlub had gotten in trouble, in Oregon, for placing all the DMV records on the Internet and, even though he had removed them, Patricia had captured the file, thinking some day it would be useful.

It was. With Tom's driver's license number, she was able to get into his credit report, and that, in turn, gave her his Social Security number. It didn't belong to Tom Ansara, but to someone else, an elderly woman in Pittsburgh. Apparently he had stolen the number. But he had used it for a very long time and through it, and his credit report, she saw a life of transience, a man of many names and, as she dug, several petty crimes, mostly involving drugs, theft, and a certain roughness with women.

That last made a shudder run through her. Her revenge fantasy had been too subtle for this man. It might have turned on her. No matter how strong she was, she might not have been able to overcome his athlete's quickness. She knew that much.

It could have ended badly. For her.

At that, she rested her head on her arms and made herself breathe. How foolish she had become. How obsessed with a man she hadn't even known. She had even mourned him, in her own way, this man she had made up.

The door to her office opened, and her brother came in. She recognized him by his footsteps.

"You okay?"

She raised her head. Her brother still carried all the weight he had put on as he aged. Sometimes he eyed her new form as if it were a reproach to him. But she liked him at this weight. It gave him a cuddly warmth that he hadn't had when he was thinner.

"Yeah," she said. "Just tired."

He nodded. All he knew about Tom was what the rest of the

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town knew: that he had been murdered in the gym. The next day, her brother had asked her if it was safe for her to return. When she assured him it was, he had said, "I hope so," and she knew, with that terse phrase, that the conversation was closed.

He pulled up the only other chair, a folding chair she kept unfolded in the corner. It squeaked as he sat on it. "Look," he said. "If I manage to get more business, we might have to leave Seavy Village. This just isn't a good place to do business, not if we start focusing on the valley."

Her heart was pounding. She didn't want to leave. She loved it here. "I won't go," she said.

"I know. I was thinking, maybe you could be in charge of our coastal lines."

That meant customer relations. It meant working alone. "Let's wait," she said. "Talk about this when the changes become real."

"It's getting closer every day, Patty," he said. Her brother was the only person who could call her Patty and get away with it.

"I know," she said. "I just don't want to think about it now."

And she didn't, not until she was on the silly StairMaster for the second night in a row. Sweat was dripping between her breasts, and the back of her neck was damp. The club's televisions were all tuned to a football game, and their sound was on, as well as the latest Rod Stewart CD at full blast. She was surprised she could hear herself think. But the noise blurred, and she found her mind wandering, going over her brother's words, trying to see if there was any reality in the changes he was discussing for his business.

Then it hit her, what he had said. *Seavy Village isn't a good place to do business.* And it wasn't. The town was small, many of its residents unskilled workers with low-paying jobs or retirees who lived on a fixed income. The tourists were seasonal: summers, mostly, with a few spikes around the holidays. Yet Tom had been here for eighteen months, maybe more. He hadn't had a single arrest, which, considering his record before he arrived, was spectacular, and she remembered nothing that made him seem as if he had been on drugs. What had he found that kept him here? It certainly hadn't been the spinning class. And whatever it had been, someone had considered it worth killing for.

Pretend this is Cascade Head, he would say. *Know how good you'll feel when you reach the top.*

And all the other sites on the coast route. He would mention them, use them in his class. But he always came back to Cascade Head, as if it were important, to them, and to him.

For one long stretch of her workout, she considered buying a bike and exploring the places he had mentioned, searching. But for what, she didn't know. And she had never searched for any-

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thing. She had no idea how to go about it.

She had to talk to Huckleby. She wondered if he would think she was crazy, all the work she had done on this. He was going to want to know why and the answer she had was really no answer at all, just a truth she was beginning to discover:

That obsession, once begun, did not end easily. That losing it felt a lot like losing love.

The police station, tucked in a back road behind the post office, was a 1960s building, all metal and sand-colored brick. Its gray tile floors were spotless, and the walls had recently been painted white. She felt oddly betrayed by its cleanliness. Somehow she had expected the grit she had seen portrayed on TV.

When she asked for Huckleby, the woman at the desk—statuesque, her uniform accenting rather than hiding her figure—nodded toward the only man sitting in a sea of desks. Patricia wasn't sure how she missed him, except that she hadn't expected this place to be this way, and somehow hadn't expected him to look so lost and all alone, bathed in the fog-gray light filtering in from the cross-hatched windows.

The smell, she noted as she walked toward him, was strong: burned coffee and stale sweat, the kind of smell that a person never got used to. It wasn't until she was standing over him that he looked up, and from the movement of his lips, she guessed he had been planning to make a comment to someone else when he edited himself for her.

"I didn't expect to see you again," he said, and kicked a green metal desk chair in her direction. She sat gingerly on it, half expecting it to squeal as her folding chair did when her brother sat on it.

His comment was strange given the size of the town they lived in. They would see each other from time to time, probably had already and just hadn't known it, until now.

She licked her lips. "I did some digging."

"Oh?" He was giving her his full attention. The file before him was closed and pushed aside, his hands threaded on the desk like a man patiently waiting to hear something he didn't already know.

"The name Ansara is unusual," she said, knowing that this was an inane way to start. "There was a movie star in the late sixties and early seventies named Michael Ansara. He looked something like Tom."

"Yeah," Huckleby said, his tone dry. "I can't decide if Tom's favorite movie was *Sometimes a Great Notion* or that awful television remake of *Dracula.*"

In spite of herself, she smiled. She ducked her head so that he wouldn't see how amused she was. This was serious, after all.

"But I did even more digging. I found out about his record."

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His eyebrows went up. "You're good," he said. "Care to share with me how you did that?"

She had thought this through before she came, and now she told him the story she had planned: It was the entire truth minus the driver's license records. Even though anyone could get DMV records simply by writing to the division, she felt almost criminal using them, even more criminal for storing them. Still, if he asked, she would tell him. She only hoped he wouldn't ask.

He didn't, but he was leaning forward now, looking at her with a mixture of puzzlement and respect.

"I would have left it at that," she said, "except I got to wondering, what would a man like that be doing in Seavy Village for so long?"

"Staying clean?" Huckleby said. Clearly he'd thought of that too.

"Maybe," she said. "But when he did spinning class, he outlined bike routes, something we could imagine while our feet were hopelessly circling." She took a piece of paper out of her battered purse. "Here are the places he mentioned, and the way he mentioned them. Cascade Head was the one he focused on, but I always thought that was because it was so high. But he could have used the Van Duzer Corridor for the same thing, or maybe something in the Cascades, and he didn't. He just kept coming back to this one, over and over, like his mind was stuck."

Huckleby glanced at the paper. "You're quite specific. How do you remember what he said?"

She flushed. "I was in his class for a long time. It got boring after a while. You did anything you could to concentrate. I focused on his words. He repeated himself a lot."

He tapped the paper against his hand. "Nice work," he said. "I knew you'd remember something if you tried hard enough."

"Is it important?" she asked.

"Important?" He kept a grip on the paper while he reached for the phone. "It's the missing piece."

She didn't hear anything for three days. Every time she thought of calling the station, she made herself do something else. The danger with obsession, the Web site told her, was that once one went away, another sometimes arose in its place. Too many, and a person needed therapy. A single one, and perhaps the person needed more to do with her life.

More than computers, exercise, and solitary meals. More than ducking her head to avoid conversations every time she went to the gym.

She joined the aerobics class and made a point, that night, of learning everyone's name. She told her brother that she thought his expansion a bad idea at this stage in their business, and he was so pleased that she used the word "their" that he didn't even

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try to argue with her. He asked her what she thought the business needed, and she told him all the things she had never said. To her surprise, he made a list and walked out of her office, studying it, ready, he said, to make changes.

On the third day, the local 5:15 newscast announced that a suspect was being held in the murder of Tom Ansara. A man, with a name Patricia didn't recognize, an out-of-towner, as the announcer called him with obvious relief, who had business with Ansara that predated his arrival in Seavy Village.

She was surprised she hadn't heard from Huckleby. She would have thought that, as a courtesy, he would have told her first.

And then she wondered where that assumption came from. She had provided a small bit of information in an ongoing investigation.

He owed her nothing. She owed him nothing. And that's where things would always stand.

The details came out bit by bit, not in the local paper, which saw itself as a promoter of tourism on the coast and as such tried to cover up the seamier stuff, but in the *Oregonian,* which followed the entire case with an interest unusual in their non-Portland coverage.

Tom Ansara's real name was Andrew Thomas. He had arrests in several states for drug crimes, most of which were minor possession violations. But two states had more serious charges against him, one in an unlikely connection with a group of art thieves operating in Los Angeles. Ansara fled the area after some Mirós, Picassos, a Jackson Pollack, and an original Dali were stolen from a house in Brentwood. He came to Oregon, took a new name, and hid, careful to stay away from Seavy Village's minor drug trade, and managing, somehow, to break off his relations with women before things became too serious.

He hadn't had anything to do with the art heists, had merely stumbled on them in the course of his other shady dealings, and knew, somehow, who was involved. Police assumed he dated one of the thieves, hearing the plans for the Brentwood theft from her. But the heat on that was high, and someone threatened him. When he came to Oregon, he made notes of all he knew and buried them on Cascade Head.

He had mailed a letter to himself the day he died—obviously he had been worried; perhaps he had seen his killer, a man named Will Garetson. In the letter, Tom explained that he had hidden a box, and how far it was from Highway 101, and he gave a detailed description of the unusual tree and rock formation near the burial site. Unfortunately, he had left out what part of 101 he was talking about. When Patricia—"a private citizen" as the papers called her—had come forward, she had provided the missing piece of information: where exactly the box was. The police looked on Cas-

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cade Head at the correct distance from 101, found the distinctive tree and rock formation, and proceeded to dig.

They found the box, and in it, the names of the people involved in the heist, a tape recording with their voices on it planning that heist, and a list of the items that they had hoped to take. Also in the box was a note about the reasons Tom had hidden in Oregon: It wasn't because his conscience had finally gotten to him about the heist or because he had been discovered by the thieves. It was because, on the two jobs the thieves performed before his disappearance, they had killed security guards, and Tom was beginning to fear that killing for sport was becoming the reason behind the heists, not the theft itself.

So he vanished, and it took them a long time to trace him. He made two mistakes: He took a regular job, and he kept the old Social Security number. Eventually Garetson found him. In fact, the article said, the man who killed Tom had been the self-defense instructor at the gym a few weeks before Tom's death. Because instructors were rarely in the building at the same time, Tom hadn't seen him. Garetson had discovered Tom's routine, where he lived, and who he had offended in Seavy Village, and had apparently decided the best way to kill the man was to do it at the gym, where all the women he slept with would then become suspects.

It would have worked if it weren't for that letter, and Detective Huckleby, who felt there was something wrong with this case from the beginning.

Patricia read the articles with avid interest, worried when she learned how easy it had been for a killer to infiltrate her small town and target a man, calmer when she realized one of the reasons the man had been targeted was because of his own behavior.

It took a week for the *Oregonian* to print all the articles, but when it was done, and Garetson was in jail awaiting trial, she felt as if it was over. Or at least part of it. She could still remember the touch of Garetson's hands on her neck as he held her in place, using her to demonstrate to the rest of the self-defense class how to do the chokehold. When his arm had wrapped around her throat, she had thought how easy it would be for him to squeeze and how easy it would be for her to die.

Apparently, he had killed Tom with no struggle. She had been right. It had been easy, after all.

So she went back to her life, changed as it was. Her brother gave her more responsibility at the i.p. and she found a jogging partner, a woman whom she had spoken to a few times at the gym and felt an affinity for. They were developing a friendship composed of short conversations followed by a mile or more of gasping silence. She found that she liked talking with someone. She actually

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looked forward to it.

By the end of the second week, she made it through two days without thinking of Tom. Then Huckleby walked into her office. He leaned against the door, smiled at her, and let his blue eyes draw her in.

"Do you do lunch?" he asked.

"Only on every other Thursday," she said, and was surprised at the tartness of her own reply.

His smile widened into a grin. "I'm buying."

She went with him to the health-food restaurant next door. He ordered the only meal with beef in it—a shredded beef taco concoction made with cream cheese instead of sour cream—and she had their homemade tomato soup and fresh sourdough bread.

"You never followed up on the case," he said after the food was served.

"You didn't keep me informed."

He took a bite from the taco and half the cream cheese fell out. He set the food down. "I was a little busy."

"But you got him," she said.

"We got him. It's up to the L.A. cops to get the rest." He sounded relieved at that.

"More excitement than Seavy Village is used to," she said.

"More than we want," he replied. Then he put an elbow on the table and watched her. She had never had anyone watch her eat before.

"You know," he said, "in all the times we talked, you never did tell me how you felt about him."

"About Tom?" she asked, stalling. She put her soup spoon down and picked up the bread, shredding it.

"Yes."

She shrugged. "He was my spinning instructor."

"And?"

There was no harm in telling him now. No harm in saying anything. She felt herself flush. She had to look away. "And I hated him."

He let out a slow whistle, as if he hadn't expected it. "Because he was a drill sergeant?"

She shook her head. The soup was nearly gone. She had made a mess of the bread. There were crumbs on her side of the table. She stared at them instead of looking Huckleby in the eye.

"Because of how he looked at me, in the beginning. Like I offended him just by being in his presence."

To her surprise, Huckleby took her hand. She raised her head, saw him looking at her with empathy, not disgust. She wanted to look away, but couldn't.

"Do you know how many times you told me that fat people get

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treated differently?"

"They do," she said.

"You're no longer fat," he said.

"I always will be." With her free hand she tapped her chest. "Inside. I'll always remember how it feels. Like an alcoholic. I'll always be a fat person crammed into a skinny shell."

"If you want to be," he said. "No one sees you that way anymore. No one treats you that way. The loathing I hear when I'm around you comes from you."

He said the words softly, gently, to lessen their sting. But they still hurt. She blinked, startled. No one had ever talked that way to her before. But then, she hadn't let anyone talk to her, really talk to her, for years.

"I don't want to treat anyone else that way," she said.

"But you do," he said. "You assume all the rest of us will look at you with that same disgust that Ansara had, and you hate us in advance."

"I don't hate you," she said.

He smiled and squeezed her hand. "It's a start, at least."

"Of what?" she asked.

He shrugged. "I don't know. Friendship, maybe something more. If you're willing."

She had never fantasized about him, not in this way, never imagined what he would sound like in bed, never allowed herself to think a man like this one would even be interested. He was a person to her, not a Greek god who looked down on the less-than-perfect with complete disdain, like Tom had been. Only Tom hadn't been. He had been as imperfect as she was. It just hadn't been apparent from the way he looked, the way he dressed, the way he spoke. Only his eyes had showed it, and only if someone paid attention.

She felt a little floaty hit of adrenaline, like she used to get in her early spinning classes after she had been on the bike awhile. Just when she thought she would be ready to quit, something in her body would adjust and she would feel slightly dizzy, slightly high. A little afraid and a bit proud of herself at the same time.

Friendship. Something more. If she was willing.

"All right," she said, and squeezed Huckleby's hand.

There was no longer a need for fantasy. The fantasy had made her blind to the realities around her. Some of those realities could have harmed her—the arm around her neck, the same arm that had crushed Tom's throat—and others could have helped her, allowed her to see that things were different now, that she was different and, perhaps, always would be.

She was no longer spinning her wheels on a stationary bike. She had been moving forward for a long time; and she had finally noticed. ●

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The Word of a Lady

by Peter Lovesey

Around the time this issue goes on sale, longtime *EQMM* contributor Peter Lovesey will be presented, in the U.K., with the Cartier Diamond Dagger, the lifetime achievement award of the Crime Writers Association of Great Britain. Peter Lovesey's achievements in the field of crime fiction span thirty years and range from historical to contemporary fiction, from novels to short stories. *EQMM* salutes him on this memorable occasion. †

Denise Wolsey woke suddenly and felt the touch of a hand on her bare shoulder, fingers curving over, squeezing. She'd been well asleep, and alone in the house . . . she thought. The nights were a trial in Shillinghurst, a great Elizabethan country house in its own park. She wasn't raised in a place where the boards creak and the plumbing gurgles and hidden creatures rustle in the tall chimneys and there are rooms no one has looked into in months. She'd spent the first eighteen years of her life in a two-bedroomed terraced house in Fulham, sharing a room with her sister.

Petrified, she lay there while her brain caught up. She hadn't heard anyone come in—but would she? Shillinghurst was so huge you could have held an auction downstairs and cleared all the furniture and she wouldn't have heard.

She drew breath to scream.

A man's voice. "It's only me."

"What?"

"Adrian."

Her husband. He switched on the bedside lamp.

She turned her head on the pillow, looked up through squeezed eyelids, and breathed a great sigh of relief. "Oh. I thought . . ."

"It's all right, wench."

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He hadn't used his pet name for her for a long time. It was an endearment, part of their private language. Tonight the tone of his voice wasn't playful. He was nervous.

"What time is it?"

"Don't know—after midnight."

"You didn't say you were coming home."

"Right."

His faraway voice, thinking of other things. *That* was more typical of Adrian. He could cut off like a phone put down, and then it hurt. She didn't need reminding that he was from another world—Eton, Oxford, the peerage—and to be fair he didn't make much of it, but when his voice altered and his eyes glazed over, she took it personally. Then she felt like a piece of lowlife. She would never have met him except for her skill at drawing and painting, that had led to a career in stage design. Their coming together had been so clichéd she didn't care to talk about it: being asked to produce the sets for an Albee play Adrian happened to be backing; and bumping into him, literally, at the first-night party and having red wine poured down her. He'd insisted on replacing the dress, which was a cheap frock out of the January sales, with the latest creation from Galliano, and escorting her to Bond Street to choose it. Then he wanted to see her wearing it at a party, he said, and she sensed with pleasure that he wasn't merely being the gentleman. He fancied her.

"What is it, Adrian?"

"What?"

"Something's happened. Why are you here? I thought you were staying over in London." They had this flat in Eaton Square. She had stayed there often.

"Did you?" Still on autopilot.

After meeting Adrian she'd been scooped into the champagne whirlpool of a society she knew nothing about: dinner parties, Ascot, Cowes. She survived, thanks to Adrian. He never left her side. And she adored swanning from event to event, meeting the same articulate young people in their fine clothes. They accepted her warmly because she was Adrian's choice; or most did. One or two of the women stared her out and cut her in the powder room, but she understood why and she could handle that. She was increasingly attracted to Adrian—his black unruly hair, the strong features that put her in mind of a Gypsy rather than a lord, and the infinite trouble he took to make sure she was comfortable among his friends.

They got engaged the same year. Her photo was in all the magazines. The ring was from Cartier, a large emerald, set in diamonds. Emerald was her birth stone (she was a May child) and signified success in love, people told her.

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The following April, they married in Bath Abbey and had their reception in the Assembly Rooms where Jane Austen had danced and Johann Strauss and Liszt had played. The honeymoon was a three-month tour of the great European cities, ending in Venice in July. By then she'd fully expected to be pregnant. She'd learned enough about high society to know that producing an heir was a wife's first duty after marriage. Adrian said it didn't concern him in the least that she was not expecting, and then suggested she saw a specialist if nothing happened before Christmas.

She stopped work. The theatre simply didn't fit in with life in the country. The house and staff occupied much of her time. They had a butler, cook, three maids, and four gardeners. Adrian was on various boards and committees and couldn't supervise the running of the house. Thoughtfully, he'd let her sister Janice live free of rent in the gatekeeper's lodge. She was supposed to be company for Denise, but it hadn't worked out. Instead of being grateful, Janice had got jealous, and now the sisters rarely spoke.

The gynecologist had said there was no reason why Denise shouldn't bear children. He was kind and encouraging and seemed to think it was far too soon in the marriage to be concerned.

Another year went by.

Adrian was increasingly called away to London for meetings. Sometimes he had to stay over. That was when Denise wished she were back in the Fulham terrace, on the lone nights in the great house. None of the servants slept in. Even the butler lived in the village.

Here was Adrian trying to tell her something. For once he was not the polished Old Etonian.

"Horrible. Bloody nightmare. Believe me, it wasn't anyone's fault."

"What wasn't?"

"The accident."

She clasped the front of her nightdress, gathering it in a bunch. "Oh God. Are you—"

"No. Some stupid hitchhiker on the A337, that road through the Forest. Rain bucketing down. Visibility poor. He stepped in the road."

"You hit him?"

He gave a nod.

"Badly?"

"Dead."

"Oh, Adrian." She was appalled.

He muttered, barely audible, "The point is, I didn't report it. Stopped—oh, yes, I stopped. There was nothing I could do for him. There was a girl with him, hysterical. He was dead all right. I got back in the car and drove on."

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Now her eyes opened wide. "You left them there? Why?"

"Can't you smell it on my breath? Had a few after the meeting. You know how it is. If they breathalyse me, it's a prison sentence."

Denise stared up at her husband. "You left this girl by the roadside?"

Adrian wasn't thinking about the girl's distress. "She wouldn't know me again. She was frantic. Quite a few cars came past. No one stopped, but I'm terrified some busybody noted my number and called the police."

"They'll come looking for you."

"You think I haven't worked that out for myself? If they do—and it's only a possibility—" He paused, and a different, gentler note came into his voice. "—would you be an angel and say I was home with you all evening?"

"Tell a lie?"

He gave a loud, frustrated sigh. "I *know*. You were brought up to tell the truth—the simple working-class morality—but you're my wife, for God's sake. If I can't rely on you, who can I turn to?"

She felt the tug of loyalties. She had a deeply ingrained respect for the truth. She'd never succumbed to the sophistries that were common currency among his class. "Surely, if they do come asking questions, they'll want to see the car, and they can tell—"

"It isn't damaged. They're built like tanks."

"If you killed him . . ."

"He bounced off the bull-bars like a ninepin. I've checked the bodywork. Not a scratch. If they come asking, there's nothing to show. It's up to you to tell them I was home by seven and here all evening."

She was shaking now. "Adrian, in the state you're in, you may not have noticed marks on the car. I think I'd better look."

"Go ahead. If I'm right, and there's nothing, will you back me?"

Probably she would, she thought, and despise herself—as well as Adrian—for the rest of her life. She pulled on her dressing gown.

He'd left the car on the drive. They went out with a flashlamp. He was right. There were no obvious marks. Denise said they ought to put the car out of sight in the garage.

"Good thinking. Would you do it? In my state I might scrape the side." He gave her the keys and went over to the garage to open it.

She stepped inside the car, took one breath, and changed her mind. No way was she going to save him.

Back in the house, he said he needed another drink. Denise went upstairs and called the police from the phone by her bed. She said her husband had come home drunk saying he'd killed a man on the A337.

When he came in, whisky in hand, she said, "Who is she?"

"I beg your pardon?"

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"The woman who was with you in the car tonight. It reeked of her cheap perfume."

He denied it. Not for long. He was too drunk to lie with any conviction. Yes, he'd offered a lift home to a friend, he said. Just doing a good turn. She was going his way and he'd offered. She'd been really upset when the accident happened. After it, he'd driven her home and then come straight here.

"Who is she, this tart?"

"It's not like that at all, my love."

"You were going to spend the night with her. You didn't tell me you were coming home. You're only here because of what happened, to get an alibi from me."

"Get a grip, wench. It's not worth getting upset."

"Tell me her name, Adrian."

"I can't remember."

"What do you take me for, you two-timing jerk?"

"Calm down, will you?"

"I've been alone for weeks in this barn of a place, while you were off with other women. 'Meetings in London.' Where—in hotel bedrooms?"

"Denise, this isn't the time. The police could be on their way here."

"They are."

"What?" His bloodshot eyes widened.

"I called them just now. Told them about you."

"Oh, come on." He didn't believe her.

"They'll be coming up the drive any minute. You'll see the blue light flashing."

He lurched across the bedroom and pushed open the big windows to the balcony. Standing out there with his hands on the balustrade, he said, "You're pathetic. It's your own sister, Janice. I took her for dinner at the Savoy. We've been lovers for months."

Janice!

Maddened, she rushed at him like the car at that poor hitchhiker. He turned, and her hands hit his chest and pushed. He tipped backwards and the balustrade caught the backs of his legs. Over the top he went, and down, two stories, to the paved area below. She heard his skull crack as he hit the stones.

She had her story ready when the police arrived. She was waiting for them beside her dead husband, playing to perfection the part of the well-bred lady refusing to break down. She'd drunk two straight brandies to steady her nerves.

"You're too late. I tried to stop him, but he was suicidal."

They felt for a pulse and decided to call a doctor, but only to confirm the death.

"How did this happen, Lady Wolsey?"

"He came home in a terrible state and told me he'd had a car

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accident and killed someone and panicked and left the scene. I tried to calm him, but he opened the bedroom windows and threw himself off the balcony."

"Blamed himself, did he?"

"Yes. He said the man is dead." Something in the policeman's look made her hesitate. "That *is* correct?"

"We have a report that a man was killed on the A337 tonight, yes. And someone got the number of the vehicle, and it's registered in your husband's name."

So her story was watertight. "Dreadful. So sudden, and tragic."

"Yes, my lady. And now I'd like to look at the car."

She told him Adrian had put it in the garage.

Twenty minutes later, the policeman was back in the house. "Was everything all right between you and your husband, Lady Wolsey?"

"Perfectly." She didn't want scandal about their private life on top of the fuss the papers would make out of the hit-and-run incident.

"It was a happy marriage?"

"Absolutely."

"How much have you drunk tonight, my lady?"

She gave a withering glare. "Some wine earlier. Brandy, for the shock. I know what I'm saying."

"We need to breathalyse you."

"Whatever for? I haven't been driving. I haven't been near the car all evening."

"Before you say any more, Lady Wolsey, I think I should tell you this. The hit-and-run car was driven by a woman. Two witnesses agree on that. And the young girl who was with the victim said a man got out to see if her friend was dead, but a woman was at the wheel."

A woman? Adrian must have let Janice drive him. Idiot.

"If it wasn't you, no problem. We'll check the fresh prints on the door and the steering wheel and compare them with yours. It does smell of scent inside."

She'd backed the car into the garage. Her prints were all over it. What could she do? Tell them about Janice and reveal her own motive for killing Adrian? What was it to be—murder, or manslaughter?

"I killed him," she said with the dignity of a grand lady. "I was at the wheel. I killed the hitchhiker. Adrian was devastated. He knew I'd go to prison for it and he couldn't bear to be parted from me. That's the reason he killed himself."

She served two years for involuntary manslaughter. They accepted the word of a lady. ●

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The Problem of the Potting Shed

by Edward D. Hoch

Sam Hawthorne, master of the impossible crime, is also one of the most eligible bachelors in Northmont. His friendship with nurse Mary Best, who has accompanied him to social functions for years, may be coming to an end with her enlistment as a navy nurse, but other women hover in the wings. Perhaps newly arrived veterinarian Annabel Christie will be Hawthorne's next flame.

It was the second Saturday of October, in 1940, that my nurse Mary Best gave me the news I'd been dreading. She waited until midafternoon, when our shortened office hours were ending, to tell me she'd decided to join the navy as a nurse. Only a few days earlier, Secretary Knox had announced a limited call-up of the naval reserve, and nurses were in short supply. (Even now, all these years later, Dr. Sam Hawthorne seemed to remember the pain of that moment. He poured his guest another small libation and continued.) I can't say it was a complete surprise, because she'd been talking about it for a month, trying to decide between the army and the navy. But it was a blow, nevertheless. Mary had been more than a nurse to me. She was a close friend and companion, a friend to my friends. She'd even kept up an occasional correspondence with my former nurse April, after April married an innkeeper in Maine.

"You've been with me more than five years," I told her. "They've been happy years for me."

"And for me too, Sam. But I was just passing through Northmont, remember? I was always on my way to somewhere else."

"I thought we might—"

She hushed my lips with her fingers. "The war won't last forever. Maybe I'll be back."

But I already knew that Mary Best was the sort who always moved forward, never back. "When are you leaving?"

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"Will November first give you time enough to find someone?"

"I don't know," I answered honestly. "That's just three weeks."

Our conversation was interrupted by the telephone, and since I was closest, I answered it. I recognized the raspy voice of Sheriff Lens at once. "Doc, are you free right now?"

"I just finished with a patient, Sheriff. What is it?"

"Can you get out to the Oberman place on Old Farm Road? We've got something here that's right up your alley."

"What is it?"

"Douglas Oberman is dead inside a locked potting shed. If you can get here right away we won't break in till you arrive."

"My God, Sheriff. The man might be still alive!"

"No chance, Doc. We can see through the window that he's been shot in the right temple. There's lots of blood."

"All right. I'll come right out."

I hung up and told Mary about it. "I'd better get out there and see what's happened. We can talk later."

The Oberman place had still been a working farm when I came to Northmont with my medical degree in 1922. After the parents died around 1930, their only son Douglas sold off all of the fields and barns until only the homestead and a fairly extensive garden remained. He was an automobile mechanic by trade, and he'd used the money from the land sale to erect the largest gasoline station in Northmont. Douglas and his wife Angie were well off by local standards and now, after eight years of marriage, they were expecting their first child. Angie was a petite, friendly woman whose tomboyish youth had hardly prepared us for the take-charge woman she'd become. I'd watched her grow larger and happier through the summer, and I was pleased for her, even though she'd chosen a doctor over in Shinn Corners as her physician. Now I only hoped she'd be able to withstand the shock of whatever had happened to her husband.

It was after four when I reached the house, and I recognized the sheriff's car parked in front, along with one of his deputies' vehicles. There were two other cars in the driveway, one of them belonging to Oberman. As I hurried up to the front porch, Sheriff Lens himself opened the door. "Glad you could come, Doc. We've got ourselves a bad situation here."

"How's Angie Oberman?"

"We put her to bed. Maybe you can give her a sedative."

"I'd better check on her husband first." Despite the sheriff's assurance that he was dead, I had to see for myself. I nodded to Felix Quinn, Lens's deputy, and followed them out the back door. The potting shed was a small green structure at the end of the garden, set against a low hedge that effectively marked the

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boundary of the property. Perhaps Oberman wanted no visible reminder of the family farm he'd sold off a decade earlier.

Another deputy was standing outside the potting shed with a stocky man I recognized at once as Howard Oberman, Douglas's brother. "What happened, Howard?" I asked.

"I don't know. My wife and I stopped by for a visit, and their neighbor came over too. The five of us were sitting around having a drink when Douglas said he had a pot of mums for us in the potting shed. He was gone a few minutes when Tomley—"

"Tomley?"

"Their neighbor from across the road. He went home, but I thought he was coming back. Just after that I heard a shot from outside and I went out to the potting shed to see if everything was all right. It was locked from the inside and Douglas didn't answer my knocking. Sandra came out of the kitchen to join me."

I tried the door but it held firm. There was no padlock in the hasp. "Is there a window?"

"Around here."

He showed me a tiny window, little more than a rectangular slit less than a foot wide and nine inches high, nearly six feet up in the shed's wall. I had to stand on my toes to peer through it. Douglas Oberman was lying on his back on the stone floor, staring at the roof with blue eyes open but unseeing. From the bloody wound with powder burns around it, there could be little doubt that he'd been shot in the right temple with a gun held very close to him.

"When I phoned Sheriff Lens I said it looked like suicide," the dead man's brother said.

The sheriff grunted. "If he shot himself, where's the gun?"

"We can only see a small portion of the floor from here. It might be under him, or under the window."

"Can you see what's holding the door closed?"

"It looks as if the padlock from outside's been attached to something. We'll have to break in the door. Unless we can smash this window."

"No one here could fit through that space," Sheriff Lens said, and I had to agree with him. A child maybe, or a small adult. "Let's break it in."

The two deputies hit the door together with their shoulders and the wood splintered. Once inside, I knelt by the body and established for certain that Douglas Oberman was dead. Almost at once I spotted the revolver, just inches from his outstretched right hand.

"Don't touch it!" Lens cautioned. "Fingerprints." He took out a handkerchief and lifted the weapon carefully by its barrel. "A revolver with one shot fired, Doc. I guess maybe I got you out here to investigate a suicide after all."

I went over to study the splintered door. A hasp had been

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screwed into the wood on the inside, and the padlock secured it to a metal staple in the doorframe. It was identical to the hardware on the outside of the door. "He unlocked the padlock, brought it inside, and locked himself in."

"Why would he do that?" the sheriff wondered.

"The most likely explanation is his pregnant wife," I suggested. "He locked the door from the inside because he didn't want Angie to suffer the shock of finding his body." But I could see that the finish on both hasps had dulled with time. There may have been some other reason for locking the potting shed while he was inside.

"Where you goin' now?" Sheriff Lens asked.

"I should look in on Angie." I left him there with his deputies and returned to the house.

Howard Oberman's wife Sandra was upstairs with her pregnant sister-in-law. She was a tall woman in her forties, beginning to develop a middle-aged spread. "It's a terrible shock," she told me softly. "She won't let me touch her."

Angie's body was almost buried beneath the covers of her bed, though I could see she was still partly dressed. "It's Dr. Hawthorne, Angie," I told her in case she didn't remember me.

"Where's Douglas?" she managed to ask, turning her tear-streaked blue eyes toward me.

"There's been an accident. I have a sedative for you, but I'd like to examine you first, to be certain the baby is all right."

"No. I have my own doctor in Shinn Corners. I'm all right." Then, "He's dead, isn't he? Douglas?"

"I'm afraid so."

A shudder seemed to run through her body. "That shot I heard. Did somebody shoot him?"

"We don't know. The sheriff thinks the wound may have been self-inflicted."

"No." It was almost a scream. "No, no, no, no! He would never have done that. He had the baby coming. We'd waited for so long and now—"

I opened my bag and took out a powdered sedative. Sandra brought me a glass of water and I poured it in, stirring it well. "Drink this, Angie. It'll help you sleep."

"I don't want—" she began, but I put it to her lips and she drank. She was asleep within minutes, as much from her exhaustion and fear as from my powder.

"How far along is she?" I asked Sandra.

"About eight and a half months. It could come any time now."

"Who's her doctor?"

"Boynton, in Shinn Corners. He's very concerned about her. He phoned this morning to see how she was doing. She talked to him briefly."

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"If she doesn't trust anyone else, you'd better get her over to him tomorrow. This shock might induce premature labor."

"I'll drive her there myself."

"We'll try to sort this thing out and determine what happened."

"Do you really think he killed himself?"

"It looks like it," I told her. "Were the rest of you all together when you heard the shot?"

She thought about that. "Not really. Angie and I were in the kitchen preparing a little snack. The men were in the living room. Pretty soon Douglas came out and took the shed key off its hook in the kitchen. He said he wanted to get something. Angie had been uncomfortable all afternoon, with the baby getting so big, and she went up the back stairs to the bathroom. I was fixing little sandwiches and a pot of tea when I heard the shot. I knew right away it came from the potting shed."

"Was the door to the shed open or closed?"

"It was closed then. I was busy with the sandwiches and didn't see him go in. Right after I heard the shot I saw my husband walk over to the shed to see what had happened. He tried the door but it wouldn't open."

I nodded. "Douglas took the padlock and locked the door from the inside. Had he ever done that before?"

"I have no idea. Perhaps Angie would know."

"She's not in any shape for questioning right now. Where is this neighbor, Mr. Tomley?"

"I don't know."

I left her with Angie Oberman and walked across the road to the Tomley place. I knew Herb Tomley vaguely by name, but we'd never really met. He raised chickens and did some harness racing at county fairs around the state. I suppose he was something of a gentleman farmer, and he looked every bit of it when he came to the door. A muscular, middle-aged man with graying hair, he wore jodhpurs and riding boots with a fancy shirt open to the waist. "What's up?" he asked.

"Mr. Tomley? I'm Dr. Sam Hawthorne. There's been a tragic accident at the Obermans' house."

He squinted into the afternoon sun. "I saw the sheriff's car. What happened?"

"Douglas Oberman's been shot. He's dead."

"I was just over there having a drink with them less than an hour ago."

"Howard Oberman thought you were coming back."

"No, I'm not much for drinking in the afternoon. One's my limit."

"Did you hear a gunshot shortly after you left?"

"I might have. I wouldn't have paid much attention. Folks around here are always shootin' at those damned chicken hawks

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circling around. I do it myself."

"Did Douglas act strange or depressed while you were there?"

"Not so's you'd notice. We were just chatting."

"All right," I said. "Sheriff Lens will probably talk to you later."

"I'll be here." He'd made no effort to invite me in, so I retreated hastily. The news of his neighbor's violent death certainly hadn't upset him noticeably.

Sheriff Lens met me as I crossed the road. "Did you give Angie a sedative?"

I nodded. "You can question her later. What does it look like?"

"Everything points to suicide, Doc. It couldn't be anything else."

Still—

"Would your deputies do an inventory of everything in that potting shed?"

"Sure, I guess so. But if it's suicide, what's the point?"

"I just want to cover all the angles."

The sheriff came by my place on Sunday morning as I was fixing breakfast. "How about some bacon and eggs?" I asked.

"Already ate at home. I just came to drop off this inventory you wanted."

Before I looked at it I told him about Mary Best's plan to enlist as a navy nurse. "I hate to see her go, but her mind is made up."

Sheriff Lens shook his head sadly. "This war is changing everyone's lives. If we really get into it, they might even want you, Doc."

"I doubt if they're looking for too many forty-four-year-old men," I said with a laugh. But we both knew that draft registration was starting that very week, with the first young men to be chosen by month's end.

The sheriff passed me a single sheet of paper. "Oberman had nothing but a handkerchief in his pockets. Here's the inventory of the potting shed. One of the flowerpots had mums in it. I guess that was what he was going to give his brother and sister-in-law."

I ran quickly down the list, then studied it more carefully. There were the expected garden supplies, flowerpots in various sizes, bags of soil, fertilizer and peat moss, two shovels, a rake and a hoe, a lawn mower, a trowel, a rolled-up sleeping bag, some loose tulip bulbs, a box of grass seed, worn canvas gloves, and a dog-eared gardening book. "That's everything?" I asked.

"That's the lot. Except for the revolver and the padlock, of course. What did you expect to find, Doc?"

"It's just my locked-room instincts again. I wanted to be sure there was no evidence of a firecracker or something that might have been mistaken for a gunshot."

"Nothing like that. It had to be suicide. The revolver was his. Angie said he kept it to kill varmints."

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But something was bothering me, something I couldn't quite put my finger on. "Why would he do it? He had everything to live for. Their first child was about to be born."

"Who knows why people suddenly turn crazy, Doc. It's something we just have to accept."

After the sheriff left I tried to put Oberman's death out of my mind, but it kept gnawing at me that afternoon while I was out raking leaves in my yard.

Finally I took a break and went in to phone his widow. There was no answer at the Oberman home, which wasn't surprising in view of the tragic event. I phoned Douglas's brother and had better luck.

"Angie's really in a bad way," Howard told me. "Sandra phoned Dr. Boynton in Shinn Corners and he said to bring her right in. He has an extra room at his house where she can stay until the baby arrives. Sandra and I will handle the funeral arrangements and take that off her mind, at least."

"You didn't remove anything from the shed after we broke in, did you, Howard?"

"Remove anything? Of course not. What would I remove?"

"I'm just thinking out loud. Call me if you hear anything about the baby."

"Of course."

I hung up and went back to my yard work. Fifteen minutes later I was phoning Sheriff Lens at home. "Sheriff, Douglas Oberman was murdered."

"How do you figure that?"

"There was no key on your inventory list."

"Key? What key?"

"He always kept the potting shed padlocked, and Sandra told me he took the key off a hook in the kitchen when he went out there yesterday. He undid the padlock and shifted it to the inside hasp. He locked it. But where's the key?"

"You don't need a key to lock a padlock. You just snap it shut."

"But he needed the key to unlock it. Where did it go? Not into his pocket, nor anywhere in the potting shed."

"Maybe he handed it back to Sandra and she forgot to mention it. We'll probably find it on the kitchen hook."

"Do you have the key to the house?"

"No reason to, Doc. It's suicide, remember? I suppose his brother has a key."

"Can you get it and meet me out there?"

"Now? It'll be dark in an hour."

"I'll be there in thirty minutes."

Sheriff Lens was there ahead of me, grumbling about the waste of his time. He unlocked the front door and I followed him in. The

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house had only been closed up since morning but already I could sense the musty odor of death. I walked first into the kitchen and snapped on the light. There were four hooks by the door for keys and one of them was empty. It was obvious that none of the remaining keys was for a padlock.

"So where is it?" the sheriff asked.

"I think Douglas took it off the hook and unlocked the shed's padlock. He may have left it hanging from the outside staple as people sometimes do. The killer arrived a moment later, took the padlock inside, and locked the inner hasp with it, probably removing the key from force of habit. Then he shot Douglas Oberman, left the gun by his right hand, and escaped."

"Escaped how?"

"Well, the floor is stone and the roof is solid. That only leaves the door or the window. Let's go look at them again."

It was almost sundown, but there was still enough light for us to examine the hasp and padlock on the inside of the splintered door. "These screws haven't been tampered with in years," Sheriff Lens observed, "and the padlock is still firmly in place. We didn't unlock it."

I smiled. "Because you had no key. Let's look at the window." I struck it with the heel of my hand and it moved a bit. With a little more effort I had it open.

"It would take a child to fit through there, and how would a child even reach it? You've got to face the fact that it was suicide, Doc."

"Then where's the key to the padlock?"

"These flowerpots are full of dirt. He could have stuck it into any one of them."

"Good luck," I said, and he started poking the trowel into the pots. I went outside to examine the ground. The earth beneath the small window was firm, showing no evidence of footprints. From there I could see the upstairs bathroom window where Angie Oberman had been when the shot was fired, but not the kitchen or living room where Howard and Sandra would have been. Herb Tomley had departed by this time, walking across the road.

I kept going in ever-widening circles, searching for what? The key Douglas might have hurled from the window before shooting himself? There was nothing. The killer might have pushed open the window and inserted the gun tied to a pole, pressed it against the victim's head, pulled the trigger with a piece of string, removed the pole, untied the pistol, and dropped it back through the window. Except what would Douglas have been doing all this time? And what had happened to the key? And why wouldn't Angie or Sandra, or the victim's brother, have seen the killer escaping after the fatal shot that they all heard?

I saw something lying in a small hollow of bare ground about

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thirty feet from the potting shed. At first I took it for the remains of a bird's nest, but then I realized that something had been burned there. I could identify some feathers, and I thought of the circling chicken hawks Herb Tomley had mentioned.

Sheriff Lens came out to join me. "Find anything, Doc?"

"Something was burned here, perhaps a bird of some sort. Do you have a bag I could put these feathers in?"

"I've probably got one in the car." He returned after a moment with a small brown bag and I placed the charred remains inside.

"Any luck finding the key?" I asked.

He shook his head. "It's not in any of the flowerpots, and I even checked that rolled-up sleeping bag. No luck."

"Sleeping bag?"

"Sure, Doc. It was on the inventory sheet."

"Why would anyone keep a sleeping bag in a potting shed?"

"Maybe he liked to sleep out under the stars occasionally."

I walked over and examined the splintered door again. "I still think it was murder. Someone padlocked the door from the inside and took the key out of force of habit. When you snap a padlock shut you always take the key."

"You're wrong this time, Doc. It's suicide."

"Then what happened to the key?"

"Hell, maybe he swallowed it." The remark was a kidding one, but as soon as it was out of his mouth I could see the sheriff's expression change. "That's it! He swallowed it!"

"Sheriff—"

"I'll have the coroner X-ray the body in the morning!"

On Monday morning I didn't wait for the sheriff's call. Instead I drove out to Annabel's Ark, where a woman veterinarian had recently opened a small animal hospital. Annabel Christie was attractive and affable, and I'd taken a good deal of kidding about her from my nurse Mary since she opened her office a couple of months earlier.

"Sam, how are you?" Annabel greeted me, returning a fat gray tabby to its cage.

"Can't complain. Are you keeping the patients healthy these days?"

"A lot healthier than yours are. I hear Douglas Oberman shot himself on Saturday."

I smiled a bit. "He wasn't my patient. Did you know him?"

"Slightly. I buy gas at his station."

"Actually, his death is what I came about."

"And not to see me?"

"Well, that too." I opened the paper bag. "I'm not as convinced as Sheriff Lens that this is a suicide. I found these charred remains

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in the Oberman yard and I'm wondering if you can identify them."

She picked up a spatula and separated the larger bits. "Feathers."

"That's why I thought of you. Their neighbor says folks around there shoot at hawks."

She shook her head. "They're too small for hawk feathers, and the markings aren't right. They look like plain old chicken feathers to me."

"Why would anyone burn them?"

"Simple. They plucked a chicken and ate it, putting the feathers in the trash which they later burned."

"Chickens." My face must have shown my disappointment.

Annabel laughed. "It's not so bad as all that. Maybe the sheriff is right about its being a suicide."

I drove back to my office thinking I'd spent enough time on a case that was going nowhere. When Sheriff Lens did call, I fully expected to hear his voice gloating in triumph at the X-ray results. He surprised me with his first words. "There's no key, Doc. He didn't swallow it."

"Oh?"

"I'm beginning to think you're right about murder."

"Let me follow up another angle," I said. I was still thinking about that unexplained sleeping bag. "I'll get back to you."

My afternoon appointments were light and I phoned Oberman's neighbor, Herb Tomley, to ask if I could stop by for another talk. "If I'm not at the house I'll be out in back shootin' woodchucks," he told me.

But before I went I put in a call to Dr. Boynton over in Shinn Corners. I'd met the man once during a regional conference at Pilgrim Memorial Hospital, but I knew little about him. He came on the phone sounding gruff and harried, but after I identified myself his tone became friendlier.

"Are you calling about Mrs. Oberman?" he asked.

"Exactly. Her husband's death was a great shock, in her condition."

"Well, I'm happy to report that Angie delivered a healthy baby boy at 3:15 this morning. He weighs eight pounds, one ounce, and she's named him Douglas after her late husband."

"She came through it all right?"

"Fine. The baby was nearly two weeks premature, but mother and son are both doing well. I'm going to keep her in our guest room for the rest of the week until she's able to return to Northmont with the baby."

"It might be best," I agreed. "By that time the funeral will be over. Is she able to receive visitors?"

"Not today, but I believe her brother-in-law and his wife are driving over tomorrow afternoon."

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"I'd like to see her too, if I could."

He hesitated. "A brief visit only. I don't want to tire her out."

"I'll try to get there around noon."

When I drove out to Herb Tomley's place no one answered my knock. I went around back and gazed out at the empty field, hearing in the distance the sharp crack of a hunting rifle. Then I saw him, a tiny spot of red far out in the field. As I trudged toward him he lowered the weapon and came to meet me. "Damned woodchucks! I think I hit one of them."

"Do you ever have trouble with people stealing your chickens, neighbors perhaps?"

"Nothing like that. Once, a couple of years ago, a hobo off the train stole a couple of chickens out of the henhouse. I had him in my shotgun sights but I figured he probably needed 'em worse than I did."

"I wanted to ask you a bit more about the Obermans."

"I hear she's having her baby."

"Had it this morning," I informed him. "A boy."

"That's good."

"You live right across from them. Ever notice anything unusual at night?"

"Like what?"

"Did Douglas ever sleep outdoors in the summer?"

"Why would he do that?"

"Perhaps after an argument with his wife?" I suggested.

"Hell, they got three unused bedrooms in the place. He wouldn't need to go outside."

"The potting shed door could be padlocked from either side."

"Yeah," Tomley answered with a smirk. "When he was doin' his potting he didn't like to be disturbed."

"What went on there?"

"Couldn't tell you."

I took a deep breath. "You could be in big trouble unless you do. What was her name?"

He stared up at the autumn sky for a moment before answering, scanning the treetop for chicken hawks. "Risa Quinn," he answered softly. "The deputy's daughter."

Felix Quinn's daughter had been the subject of whispers more than a year earlier, in the summer of '39. Just nineteen years old and working at the soda fountain next to Northmont's only movie theater, she'd suddenly left town amidst rumors that she was pregnant. Some even said she'd been having an affair with an older married man, though no name was ever mentioned. We learned later that she indeed had a baby and was living with an aunt in Boston.

I thought about all that as I drove over to Shinn Corners to visit

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Angie Oberman and her new baby. Was it possible that Douglas had fathered two children by two different women? Of course it was possible. It happened all the time. But I had to admit that illicit lovemaking in a locked potting shed was a new one on me.

I tried to remember what Risa Quinn looked like. Could she possibly have fit through that small window in the shed? Had she come back to avenge herself on the man who did her wrong? Or was Herb Tomley merely repeating an unfounded rumor?

Shinn Corners was smaller than Northmont, across the line in the next county. It was an area of flat tobacco farmland, of scrubby countryside leading into low hills. There was no hospital to compare with ours, which was why I'd been surprised that Angie chose to have her baby there. But when I pulled up to Dr. Boynton's place I saw a large home with a well-tended garden and stately shade trees. It reminded me of Angie Oberman's house in Northmont, and perhaps that was reason enough for her to choose it.

Dr. Boynton was a robust, red-faced man with a mole on his left cheek. He greeted me warmly and introduced me at once to his wife Elizabeth. "She assisted at the delivery," he explained. "She's a registered midwife."

"That's certainly keeping it in the family," I said.

Elizabeth Boynton smiled. "We like it that way. The Shinn Corners hospital leaves something to be desired. We hope someday soon to build a new one. Would you like to see Mrs. Oberman now?"

"If I may."

"Come this way."

I followed her up the stairs to the second floor, where I could already hear the gurgling sounds of a baby. Angie Oberman was sitting up in bed, looking small but happy, with the newborn cradled in her arms. "So good of you to come see me, Dr. Hawthorne."

"You're looking well, Angie. And Douglas is a beautiful baby." He had a tiny thumb in his mouth, with a tuft of silken hair over one of his deep brown eyes.

"Thank you. I believe he looks a bit like his father, around the mouth." The mention of her husband brought a sudden sadness to her face, as if she had just remembered. "When is the funeral?" she asked.

"On Wednesday, I think. Howard and Sandra will be here soon. They can tell you for certain."

"It'll be good to see them."

After we'd talked about the baby for a few minutes, Dr. Boynton came in to join us. "We mustn't tire her too much. She has more visitors on the way."

Angie had one more question for me. "Is it true that my husband shot himself?"

"The sheriff is certain of it."

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"And you?"

"Just one thing bothers me. Why would your husband want to lock the potting shed door from the inside?"

"I don't know. I never went out there. The garden was his hobby. Perhaps when he was working there he didn't want to be bothered by Herb Tomley or our other neighbors."

"Did you actually see Tomley go back home?"

"No. I was in the kitchen with Sandra and then I went up to the bathroom." She patted her now flattened belly. "I was very uncomfortable."

"But when you heard the shot you looked out the bathroom window."

"Yes."

"Did you see anyone at all near the shed's door or window?"

"No. There was no one."

Dr. Boynton cleared his throat. "Please, Doctor—"

"All right." I took her hand. "I'll see you back in Northmont."

Elizabeth Boynton was waiting downstairs. I realized now that she had the large body and strong hands of a midwife. They were like earth mothers, guiding us across an uncharted sea.

On my way back to Northmont I recognized Howard Oberman's car and honked my horn. He pulled off the road opposite me and I crossed over to say a few words. Sandra was in the passenger seat by his side. "I've just seen Angie and the baby," I said. "They're both doing fine."

"I'm anxious to see her," Sandra said.

"What's Boynton like?" her husband asked.

"He seems very caring, a good doctor from all I could tell. His wife assisted at the delivery, which was in their home."

"How long will she be there?"

"The rest of the week, at least. It's just as well she doesn't return until after the funeral."

"Is the investigation concluded?" Sandra asked.

"I have one more person to speak to, one of Sheriff Lens's deputies. Then I think we'll wrap it up."

They went on their way and I returned to my car. Once back in Northmont I drove to the sheriff's office and found Felix Quinn seated at one of the desks. "How are you, Felix?" I greeted him.

"Can't complain. Not much doing today."

I pulled a chair up to his desk. "I need to ask you something about your daughter."

"Risa? She lives in Boston with my sister. Haven't seen her since she went away."

"I heard she had a child."

He avoided my gaze. "I guess so. My wife and I don't talk

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about it much."

"Do you know who the father is?"

"I got my ideas."

"Did you ever think it might be Douglas Oberman?"

His eyes shot up and locked with mine. "What do you know?"

"I've heard rumors."

"Are you trying to pin his death on me?"

"You were one of the deputies who smashed in the door of his shed. Perhaps that padlock was open and you snapped it shut."

"You know that's not so. We could see through the window that it was locked."

"But that's where he took your daughter, wasn't it?"

"If I knew that for a fact, I'd have killed him long ago."

Sheriff Lens came in then, a bit surprised to see us with our heads together in serious conversation. "What's going on?"

"We're just reviewing the evidence," I said. "Do you remember when we noticed the shed was locked from the inside?"

"Sure, we saw it through the window."

"That's how I remember it too," the deputy confirmed.

I knew they were right. Quinn might have had a perfect motive, but he couldn't have done it. For one thing, he'd have had to lose about forty pounds to fit through that window. I stared hard at him, and in that instant I knew the *how* and the *who* and the *why*.

"Sheriff, you have to come with me, right away."

"Where are we going?"

"I'll tell you on the way."

As we traveled over the country roads I kept the sheriff in suspense. There was still so much to work out in my own mind. I would only say, somewhat enigmatically, "I could tell you the whole thing in three words. They explain how Douglas could have been killed in that locked shed, who pulled the trigger, and even a possible motive for the crime."

"Three words?"

"Three words."

"Will you tell me this much, Doc? Was the killer actually inside the shed with him?"

"Yes."

"And was the door really locked from the inside?"

"Certainly."

"Then Douglas must have lived long enough to snap the padlock shut after his killer left."

"Not with that head wound. It would have killed him instantly."

Sheriff Lens puzzled over it while I drove. Presently he said, "Hey, we're on the road to Shinn Corners."

"That's right. We're going to Dr. Boynton's house. I hope

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Howard and Sandra are still there."

"What does Boynton know about this?"

"Almost everything."

We pulled up in front of his house and I was pleased that Howard's car was still there. When Elizbeth met us at the door I could see the sudden fear in her eyes. "What do you want?"

"The truth," I answered.

Her husband was right behind her. "You've had your visit for the day. Angie has to rest now."

"I think not, Doctor."

Hearing our voices, Howard Oberman came to the head of the stairs. "What's going on here?"

"I must see Angie right away."

We went up the stairs, the sheriff trailing behind. Sandra was there with the new mother, carefully cradling the baby. She stared at us, startled. "What's going on?"

"We're here to wrap this up," I said. "I can tell you who killed Douglas, and how it was done, in just three words."

"And what are those words?" Dr. Boynton asked.

I looked for the first time at the small, slender woman in the bed and said simply, "Angie wasn't pregnant."

I hurried on before anyone could speak. "A little while ago, back in Northmont, I was questioning your deputy, Sheriff. I believed Felix Quinn might have had a motive and I was trying to figure out how he might have lost enough weight to squirm through that slit window in the potting shed. You see, that was our problem. The shed wasn't a classic hermetically sealed room. It had an unlocked window that could be pushed open with a little difficulty. But none of the people involved could fit through it."

"What are you trying to say?" Dr. Boynton demanded.

"Angie is the only one who could possibly be described as small, and she was almost nine months pregnant. Certainly in her condition she could never have squeezed through that window. But then I thought of something else. It's virtually impossible for two blue-eyed parents like Douglas and Angie to have a brown-eyed child like Doug here. You must know, Dr. Boynton, that it was a not uncommon practice some years back for women to fake a pregnancy by wearing padding and then adopt an unwanted child as their own."

"Padding?" Sheriff Lens asked.

"A small pillow at first, which increased in size as the months passed. The woman wore them strapped around her middle. That's what you wore, wasn't it, Angie? And before you came here Sunday morning you burned the small one so it wouldn't be found. I identified some charred chicken feathers, a common stuffing for pillows."

"Are you saying Angie killed my brother?" Howard asked.

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"I am. She must have known about his dalliance with other women in the locked shed. Perhaps she'd even heard rumors that he fathered a child by Quinn's teenage daughter. Yet she was made to imitate a pregnancy and take an unknown child into her home. It was probably Douglas's idea, and she resented it. Perhaps she even feared it was from another of his adulterous affairs."

"It wasn't," Boynton assured us. "I know the parents. They have a large family here."

"I should have been suspicious from the beginning, when you wouldn't let me examine you and wouldn't let your sister-in-law even touch you. You couldn't have us finding the padding, especially after you'd killed Douglas."

"But nobody saw her leave the shed after they heard the shot," the sheriff argued.

"I established that the shed window could only be seen from the upstairs bathroom, where Angie claimed to be. The others could only see the front door. Angie slipped down the back stairs, or perhaps never went up in the first place. She'd no doubt suggested that her husband give Sandra the mums, and she ran down to meet him at the shed. She took the padlock inside, locked the door, and shot him at close range. Dropping the key in her pocket was force of habit, I suppose. She wasn't wearing her padding, so it was no trouble pushing open the slit window and boosting herself up and out. You'd been something of a tomboy in your younger days, Angie. You pushed the window closed and returned to the house behind that row of bushes, just as you'd no doubt practiced it earlier."

"The Boyntons knew nothing about it," Angie said, speaking for the first time. "They're good people who try to place unwanted babies with childless couples."

"And they phoned you Saturday morning to tell you the time had come."

"Yes. I had the gun ready. It was a good time to do it."

Sheriff Lens shook his head. "It's never a good time for murder, Mrs. Oberman."

All the while I was telling Mary Best about it the following morning, I could see she was brimming over with news. "I have to tell you, Sam, I think I have a new nurse for you."

"Oh?"

"You know I correspond with April. I told her I was leaving and she phoned last night from Maine. Her husband André is in the naval reserve and he's been called up for eighteen months' active duty. Someone's going to manage the inn for them and she's moving back to Northmont until he returns."

"April? Do you think she'd want to come back to work?"

"She'd love it," Mary told me. ●

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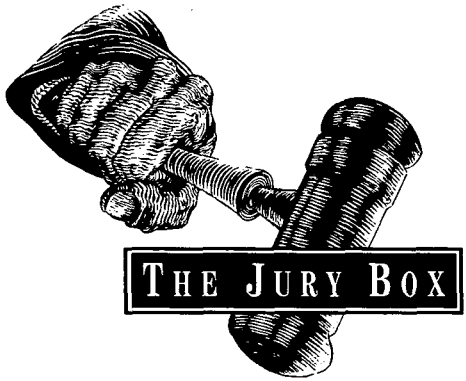

by Jon L. Breen

A frequent complaint of this column has been the excessive length the crime fiction market currently demands. Padding is rampant, and the typical 300-page-plus novel would be better cut by a third. All the books reviewed below are under, and some well under, 200 pages. Is it any coincidence most of them come from publishers outside the Manhattan mainstream?

**** Domenic Stansberry: *Manifesto for the Dead,* Permanent Press, 4170 Noyac Road, Sag Harbor, NY 11963; $22. In a deft pastiche from the author of the Edgar-nominated *The Last Days of Il Duce* (1998), Jim Thompson battles the effects of age, alcoholism, and shrinking markets for his writing in early '70s Hollywood. The appropriately dark and downbeat novel is written in eerie approximation of the haunted wordsmith's own style. (The revised edition of James Sallis's 1993 study *Difficult Lives* [Gryphon Books, P.O. Box 209, Brooklyn, NY 11228-0209; $15] offers beautifully written essays on the lives and work of Thompson and two other noir icons, David Goodis, and Chester Himes.)

**** Mitch Cullin: *Branches,* Permanent Press, $22. A chillingly effective novel in verse is told by a murderous rural Texas sheriff who is bound to remind readers of the narrator of Thompson's 1952 classic *The Killer Inside Me.* The main character's name is only one ironic touch in this tour of a twisted mind. How can you not empathize with a man who so loves his dogs and is so shocked at the attitudes of his skinhead stepson?

**** Joanna Cannan: *They Rang Up the Police,* Rue Morgue Press, P.O. Box 4119, Boulder, CO 80306; $14. Scotland Yard's Inspector Guy Northeast looks into the disappearance of one of three middle-aged spinster sisters, who live cozily, decorously, and above all courteously with their mother in an English village.

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Published in Britain in 1939 but never in the United States, this is first-rate Golden Age detection with a likeable detective, a complex and believable murderer, and a level of style and craft that bears comparison with Sayers, Allingham, and Marsh. Publishers Tom and Enid Schantz contribute their usual informative introduction.

**** Paco Ignacio Taibo II: *Just Passing Through,* translated from the Spanish by Martin Michael Roberts; Cinco Puntos Press, 2709 Louisville, El Paso, TX 79930; $21.95. An opening series of notes playfully dodges an obvious question: How much of this documentary novel recounting the Mexican author's effort to trace the life of mysterious '20s anarchist, labor activist, and left-wing hero Sebastian San Vicente is nonfiction and how much invention? A thriller, even a detective story in a way, it's unconventional as either, a time-jumping mix of politics, history, and journalism from a unique literary talent.

*** Bill Pronzini, *Crazybone,* Carroll & Graf, $23. San Francisco's Nameless Detective probes the question, why does a widow refuse to collect on her late husband's life-insurance policy? He also looks into a suspicious death in his hardboiled-novelist mother-in-law's retirement community, and offers one one his patented comic descriptions of a disastrous social occasion. A solid entry from a great series.

*** Ken Bruen: *Taming the Alien,* Dufour Editions, Chester Springs, PA 19425-0007; $15.95. The second in Bruen's White Trilogy about London cops Brant and Roberts is full of the satirical culture references and anti-procedural touches that made *A White Arrest* such grim fun. Included this time is an American foray; some of Bruen's over-the-top stabs at American dialect hit the mark, others not.

*** Nora DeLoach, *Mama Pursues Murderous Shadows,* Bantam; $5.99. As daughter-cum-Watson Simone tries to plan a party for her parents' 35th wedding anniversary, small-town South Carolina social worker Grace (Candi) Covington again turns amateur sleuth to prove a young woman's ostensible suicide was really murder. One good feature of this pleasantly low-key cozy is the African American Mama's positive relationship with the county's white sheriff.

** Charles West, *The Sacred Disc,* Salvo Press, P.O. Box 9095, Bend, OR 97708; $12.95. Bob Fisher, inexperienced private eye of San Jaoquin (i.e., a fictionalized Fresno), California, delivers the traditional sex, violence, and wisecracks in his search for the original copy of a religious cult's sacred text, recorded on a floppy disc. If the plot and development are nothing special, Fisher and his talented Chicana partner offer

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enough humor and human interest to merit a return visit.

** M.T. Jefferson: *The Victory Dance Murder,* Berkley, $5.99. Kate Fallon, a small-town Pennsylvania Nancy Drew who seems young for her twenty-something years, solves a murder in the early days of World War II. Proving that a short book can be as padded as a 400-page tome, the novel is steeped in interesting if often irrelevant period detail. Readers who want fair-play clues will search in vain, but the novel has some of the charm of an adolescent mystery from a more innocent time. (Jefferson is the pseudonym of H. Paul Jeffers, who specializes in nostalgic period pieces.)

** Gary Lovisi, *Blood in Brooklyn,* Dufour Editions, $15.95. In his first book-length case, mega-tough private eye Vic Powers duels a supremely evil boyhood friend. If this bloody and emotional narrative could be believed for a second, it would be too painful to read. Fortunately, it can't. Lovisi is good messy fun, something like operatic hardboiled stylists Carroll John Daly, Don Pendleton, and Mickey Spillane; or masters of excess like Sax Rohmer and the late Michael Avallone. The 140-page novel is accompanied by a Powers short story with a title that says it all: "Violence Is The Only Solution."

"SHE MAY HAVE THE RIGHT TO REMAIN SILENT, BUT SHE DOESN'T HAVE THE WILL!"

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Art by Allen Davis

FATHOMING FORTUNE

by Clayton Emery

"Dast you call me a liar? I'll flay your hide to bones, you sneering swine! Where's the royal forester? Summon him at once!"

The shouting came from the long wooden hall not far from the village center. A brown palfrey cropped guelder roses. Petitioners queued at the door peered within. Beholding Robin Hood, they immediately beseeched him with a dozen requests and complaints. Fending with both hands, the outlaw pushed past into the Foresters' Hall.

The counting house, or "office," was awash in scrolls, parchments, codices, and books heaped on tables, squashed in a press, stuffed in wicker baskets on the floor, and even hung on the walls in burlap sacks. Every scrap, Robin knew, had to be sorted, read, answered, or recorded, but fortunately not by him, who considered the place a glimpse of hell.

Two officials quailed before an angry knight. Tall and rawboned, he wore a gray gypon painted with two popeyed hawks' heads and a baldric and sword. A heavy quirt twitched in his

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hand like a horse's tail.

"I'm the king's keeper," said Robin. "Berate me if you must. What's your grievance?"

The knight sneered at Robin's tattered shirt and puckered hose, which contrasted so oddly with his silver hunting horn and Irish fighting knife. "You're never the king's keeper! You look like a beggar!"

"I am a royal forester, appointed by King Richard for—many reasons confounded. Consider it a penance, and I've ta'en a vow of poverty. Call me Sir Robert, or Robin Hood. Who, pray, are you?"

"Sir Laird, steward to Lord Percival at Mount Royal!"

"And where's that?"

"Where's— Up the hill, by the beard of Christ!" The knight flailed his quirt in the air. "Viscount Percival is liege lord to all this valley, and I manage his estates! How can the royal forester not know that?"

"I stand in the wrong forest. Sherwood is my home." Robin wished he were there. This was the New Forest in England's far south. "Your grievance?"

"Your dastardly clerks would cheat me out of a pound!"

"All this shouting for a pound? I'd pay it myself to buy peace." Robin turned to his bailiff, the forest's true administrator. "Sloan, what transpires?"

"Sir Robert, we seek to collect all the outstanding fines levied by the last court before convening the next." Sloan was built like a bear, grizzled and scruffy in a forester's green shirt embroidered with a bow-and-arrow badge. A cast in one eye always regarded the ceiling, so Robin never knew where to look. "Sir Laird's fine is delinquent. We sent a note as a reminder, but—disagree on the amount."

"This's not what was levied!" The knight flung a scrap of parchment, which Robin snatched from the air.

The sheep's skin had been scraped so often it was translucent, then chalked white, then inked in smudgy Latin. The scrawls meant little to Robin, who passed it to his bailiff. "What charge does this fine reconcile?"

Because of the strong element of adventure in Clayton Emery's Robin Hood stories, readers occasionally lose sight of the fact that virtually all the stories in this series contain a conventional whodunit plot. There may be a lot of dash in the way Robin and Marian approach a mystery, but brain power, in this instance Marian's good thinking, almost always provides the key to the mystery.

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"The verdict was 'waste without warrant,'" snapped Sir Laird. "A rascally family in a far hamlet felled king's trees without permission, then let their damned cow eat coppices! The blighters were fined for purpresture, but so was milord viscount! And me! The forest court claimed I should have kept better eye on the tenants!"

Considering a steward's job was to oversee both land and serfs, Robin thought the accusation just, but kept mum. "And your fine was—what?"

"One pound, two shillings!" The quirt jiggled in the air. "I was standing right there when it was pronounced! One and two is enough a small fortune, let alone two and two as your clerks claim!"

Silently Robin agreed, since a steward might only receive five pounds a year in hard money. Helplessly, he turned to his bailiff. "Sloan?"

"The attachment roll stands, milord. Show them, Courtland." The clerk was a dark and vacuous man in a forester's shirt with no adornment. Courtland unrolled an illuminated scroll calligraphed in Latin. With practiced ease he fingered Sir Laird's name and fine. "Two pounds, two shillings is set down—"

"Call me a liar?" Red-faced, Sir Laird flung back his quirt and slashed the air. The blunt whip smacked Courtland's ear and cheek, and knocked him spinning. Tumbling, his head whacked a doorframe with an audible *clonk!*

Furious himself, Robin hammered Sir Laird's arm and stole the quirt. The knight drew steel. His sword sizzled in a vicious arc that barely missed Robin's belly. Backing, the knight's eyes jigged in their sockets with fear: He'd gone too far. Fending Robin back with his blade, he crabbed through the door and scuttling crowd, flung himself in the saddle, and drummed away in a cloud of dust.

"Curse the lout! With a bow I'd split his spine!" Hurling away the quirt, Robin knelt by the sprawled clerk and felt his head. "No blood. Nasty, but just a bump, I think. Can you sit?"

"I—can." Dizzy, Courtland sagged, rubbing his head and wincing. The handsome clerk fancied himself a ladies' man, Robin guessed, for he sported a bronze ring inscribed *Pensez de moi,* "Think of me," and a slim leather belt whose bronze tips were enscrolled with lovebirds and flowers.

"Rest. And don't fret," Robin joked, "you've still got your looks."

Sloan had stepped to the door. "That bully! Temper like a beestung bull! He'll return to Mount Royal. Shall we send a pair of foresters to arrest him?"

"Tomorrow or after? That's too late." Robin weighed his forces. Foresters patrolled their bailiwicks by day, or days, so were unavailable. He lacked his Merry Men, only Marian, while the knight might boast a dozen retainers up at the manor. "We'll sic the sheriff on him. Who is it here?"

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"No one worth mentioning." Sloan sought solace in straightening piles of parchment. "I shan't excuse Sir Laird, but neither can I fault his ire. We're all of us plagued by documents *soi-disant*."

"English, please," said Robin. "It may sound like a dogfight, but 'tis a useful tongue."

"Spurious documents, milord, counterfeits. Regard." Sloan took two scraps from a basket and held them side by side. They looked alike to Robin, who said so. "Exactly! That's our problem! We keep finding duplicate deeds with different names!"

"So?" Robin Hood scratched his elbow. "I thought that's what scribes did: copy deeds and tot up sums. Besides, what matters? A man knows his own property, don't he?"

Sloan aimed a basilisk eye. "Generally, milord, but where the properties *don't* agree we can't levy the correct taxes and rents. You saw Sir Laird's reaction."

Robin Hood looked blank. All he knew of money was what he robbed from saddlebags and purses. "Perhaps I should—"

"Speaking of rents." A parchment came to Sloan's hand. "Here's another gone unpaid. The Cistercians along the river rent from us a *sylva de centum porcis,* 'a hundred-pig wood,' but their wood ward refuses to pay *cheminage* because the last swainmote—"

Robin raised his hands in surrender. "Sign my name and I'll swear to't. Meantime, I'll whip up our sheriff. Where does he reside?"

"Good Sheriff Garrett 'works' beyond the hammer pond these days." Sloan rolled a cast eye. "But you'd get more busyness from my wife's cat."

Robin Hood only cared about getting outdoors, but first he had to brave the gauntlet of petitioners. "Milord, my pigs—" "Never mind her pigs! My neighbor's laid claim to my woodfent—" "Sir Forester, I can't afford meat, so I were given a flitch of venison—"

"Talk to the bailiff." Robin avoided eye contact. "He manages the forest, not I. Talk to the bailiff—"

Striding, he broke free and fairly skipped along the village common towards the millpond, scattering chickens before him. Lyndhurst was named after the lime trees that adorned the hills stacked about. The village lay in a narrow bottom split into three fingers, and was comprised of a dozen cottages, a church and tithe barn, and scanty fields. Yet Robin looked to the forest. The lime trees made him homesick, for his beloved Greenwood was shadowed by a mountainous lime, half a hundred leagues north.

The lower end of the vale dipped to a millpond shored by an earthen dam and wooden spillway. Beyond it, a second pond was being constructed within new embankments and a taller spillway. The millpond was fairly clean, but the second pond, evil and oily, was dark as peat. A dirty stream trickled from it into bosky woods hemmed by hills.

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And it reeked. An eye-smarting fishy fug made Robin's nose run. He hadn't smelled anything this vile since the trenches before Acre, where heaped corpses had rotted in desert sun. As Robin watched, a miller in a flour-dusty apron tipped a barrow into the lower pond, discharging pig offal and manure, dregs of beer yeast, spoiled grain, rotten cabbage, and a dead cat. The putrid offering touched off a boiling explosion of green heads and needle teeth that made Robin blink. That unlucky cat, he supposed, would be a skeleton before it hit bottom.

Perhaps two acres, the pond was unfinished. Dark water lapped at the heels of men and boys who toiled to enlarge it. They plied grub axe, mattock, slasher, and weed hook to fell trees and root up undergrowth. Nothing, Robin noted, was wasted. Trees became posts, branches became treenails and bavins, and leaves were dragged away for cattle browse. Saplings were trimmed into spars for roofs and fences and beanpoles, or split into wands for baskets. Topsoil was grubbed into baskets and sold for gardens, and rocks, clay, and sand were tamped into the dykes. Only thorn bushes were burned.

One man sat idle on a stool under a willow tree. Full-bellied, he dressed like a pauper in an undyed shirt, holed hose, and cracked shoes, and his only action was to pick up twigs and crumble them to bits. Occasionally he called for a lopper or feller to work harder, but otherwise rested. Robin could guess his identity.

"You're Garrett, the sheriff? I'm Sir Robert, the king's new forester." The fat man rose and slowly doffed his hat, but said nothing, so Robin added, "A knight assaulted one of my clerks. Sir Laird, steward for yonder manor."

"Has he now?" Groaning to vaunt a bad back, the sheriff creaked onto his stool. "Beggin' your pardon, milord. 'At's shameful."

Tools clashed and leaves rustled. Robin asked, "Will you arrest the villain? A sheriff's job is to preserve the peace and pursue justice."

"Oh, I know't, sir." The man took no offense. Fat fingers punished a twig: snap, crack, snap. "But Sir Laird, he's a different sort."

"What sort?"

"Oh, you know." A stick waved vaguely. "No point tryin' to arrest him."

"No point?" Robin wanted to kick the sheriff's shins. "Call a hue and cry! Walk up the hill and accost him! Clap him in shackles!"

"That's not how it's done, milord." Fat lips pursed. "You're new here'bouts, or you'd know."

Marveling at the man's lassitude, Robin asked, "How long have you been reeve of this shire?"

"Ah, since forever!" The man smiled as if complimented. "My father were sheriff, so naturally I took it on. 'Twas my b'holden duty."

Robin wondered the word "duty" didn't stick in his throat. He

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turned to go, but then realized what he'd seen. "Sheriff, these men hag royal forest."

"Aye." Garrett nodded, sober as a cow. "I've a charter signed by Sir Dunton, forester b'fore the last. He 'lowed it because I'm improving the king's land in a dozen ways."

Catching a whiff, Robin snorted. "The stink don't improve the air."

"Ah, t'smells like money. Like raisin' pigs: 'The fouler the food, the sweeter the meat.'" Garrett smiled at his small jest. "The village gets shet of its garbage and gets back spars and firewood, men are workin', we're rootin' out vermin like foxes and badgers, and we'll have more meat for pies than we can eat."

"And you make a profit sitting on a stool," noted Robin.

"Oh, a shillin' or two, 'haps. I done the hardest part thinkin' 't'up. Come to me in a dream while I were nappin' under this tree."

"Truly a gift from God. Good day, Sheriff."

Shaking his head, Robin stalked off. He wanted to march up the hill and seize Sir Laird by the scruff of the neck, but couldn't do it alone unless he worked by stealth. If at all. The knight might go unpunished.

Deep in thought, he rounded the bend for the Foresters' Hall. Immediately he saw the queue of petitioners, who saw him, and the outlaw sagged at the knees. He'd rather mount a gallows than juggle complaints and palimpsests. Seeking sanctuary, he noted the sun slanted long through western trees. The day was old enough. Feeling guilty, he nonetheless diverted for home.

The New Forest was actually ancient, and home to ghosts uncountable. Under these trees, blue-painted Picts and Druids had burned alive Roman soldiers in wicker cages. Witches had sacrificed victims to the sun with bronze knives. The Wild Huntsman and his phantom hounds sometimes rode in moonlight to sweep unwary souls to hell. In a shadowed glade King Rufus the Red had been killed by an errant arrow, a death foretold by a naked spirit riding a black goat. Even the trees were queer, Robin knew. In glades and hollows never walked by men reigned prickly hollies, paired like animals male and female; the man-hating elm with its silent widowmakers; and the malicious yew that poisoned the ground. When night clothed the New Forest, villagers barred their doors, carved crosses in the wood, and hung garlic at every window.

Robin Hood had use of the keeper's lodge a quarter-mile removed from the village. A large house built on crucks like wooden wishbones, it was clad in boards and shingles with a chimney at either end. The name "Foxarbre" was carved into the lintel, which the Fox of Sherwood had taken for a good omen, until he saw a red fox

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skin nailed to the door. Vines in chalk circled the door frames front and back: unbroken lines to bar the devil from entering.

The lodge had come with a steward, a chamberlain, three maids, a cook and two sculleries, a hired hand and his boys, cattle, swine, fowl, three horses, two dogs, a ginger cat, and, in spring, a stork who nested on a chimneypot. More than the new master, Robin had muttered, "Half of Dorset hangs at my elbow."

As Robin sat down to supper in the spartan dining hall, Ralph the chamberlain poured him a foaming flagon of ale. Marian sipped wine, a taste developed among French nuns. A maid brought cabbage soup ripe with pepper, pandemain bread, cold sliced tongue, goat cheese, and blood pudding.

"And how was your day, other than short?" Defying custom, Marian sat catty-corner at Robin's elbow, not at the table's far end. Further defying custom, she dressed like a man, though called her shirt a smock and her jerkin a bodice. Wood crackling in the fireplace made purple highlights ripple on her raven hair.

"A knight half killed my clerk, then threatened me with steel. That was the best part of the day." Robin told about Sir Laird's quirt, Sloan's counterfeits, and the sheriff's indolence.

"Poor Courtland, caught in the backwash. He's not the first to be struck by lightning intended for Robin Hood," Marian teased. "If the sheriff won't act, you can always ambush Laird and thrash him. That's an easy fix. It's those counterfeit deeds seem the greatest danger to the forest."

"Not you too." Robin dunked his bread in melted butter. "I don't trust letters a'tall. Credit ledgers and bills of exchange smack of usury. A man's word and his neighbors' should suffice to identify his property. I lent Sir Richard at Lea money to pay back his mortgage, and it returned twicefold, and never a scrap of parchment passed between us."

"Piffle," returned Marian. "You, of all people, should know the pen is mightier than the sword. A stroke of a quill let the Sheriff of Nottingham steal your family's estate."

Robin Hood stopped eating. "True, but I was away on crusade and he reckoned I'd be killed. And he's a thief, so a liar. It's not the same."

"It is. Don't you accuse King Richard of selling tracts of this very forest for hard cash, then selling the same tract twice and thrice? Don't underestimate men of letters. An eagle can lose a brood to a rat that gnaws its eggs."

"I could stand to eat some eggs. And I ate rats at Acre and was glad to get 'em."

"Did you say grace aforehand? Don't be crude. And don't change the subject. You could grasp letters and accounts if you wished't."

"I've no wish to be a clerk." Robin shook his head. "The dons at

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Oxford would set the 'lered against the lewed,' the learned against the unlearned. I'll remain a lamb of Christ and inherit the earth."

Marian laid her hand on her husband's. "A ram of Christ, perhaps. Stubborn and hardheaded."

"Careful," Robin warned, "I might smear ink on your smock."

"You spurn my caress?" Mock-pouting, Marian cranked back Robin's little finger until, yowling, he and his chair crashed on the floor.

Tilting her head, batting her eyes, Marian simpered, "No dessert? It's pears in ginger."

"Courtland's gone?" The sun had barely risen and already Robin Hood was besieged by his bailiff.

"Disappeared! Just when I need him most!" Sloan absentmindedly sifted parchments. The other two clerks, a husband and wife, kept their heads down. "When he didn't arrive, I sent a boy to his cottage. He went out by night and never came back! He's not anywhere in the village!"

Which left an entire forest, thought Robin, though he doubted a callow clerk would venture into the woods. He mulled possibilities. Not in the village . . . Wandered off? Could his head wound have addled him? Unlikely . . . Waylaid? By whom? Any strangers would be noteworthy . . . "I wonder if he ran afoul of Sir Laird?"

"Sir Laird?" Sloan's cocked eyes pondered the ceiling and door at the same time. "Because he thinks Courtland cheated him? He may've met him on the road."

"Laird and I have unfinished business," stated Robin. "Now's the time to brace him. And this time I'll drag along our sterling sheriff. He's not much, but all we have."

"Courtland was much. Two good hands." Sighing, Sloan turned to his work, parchments heaped like autumn leaves.

Dew still wet the path as Robin trekked down the vale to Sheriff Garrett's new pond. The *tok, tok, tok* of a mallet told him someone worked already. Past the first spillway, he saw Garrett wobbling in a flat-bottomed boat while hammering tall stakes into the pond's bottom. The stakes formed a narrow X. The portly sheriff looked up, almost upset the boat, and only saved himself by clutching tight to one stake.

"Good morrow, Sir Sheriff!" Robin Hood climbed the dyke above the stinking pond. "I catch you working! Perhaps pigs will fly before noon!"

Garrett wiggled the two stakes to ensure they were seated, then poled his boat clumsily to Robin's bank. The outlaw's craggy hand brought the fat man to safety across stumps not yet drowned.

"You labor too hard, Hercules," Robin teased. "Callus those soft hands and folks will think you honest."

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"I'm honest enough. It's my brain's callused." Garrett wore a deep belt pouch, and from it plucked a kerchief to mop his sweating face. The outlaw wondered if he carried his money in there, close to his heart. "And I needs drive the stakes myself to see't done right."

"I nod to that notion," replied Robin. "Many's my plan has foundered for handing it to another. What do the stakes?"

"Oh." Puffing, Garrett gestured vaguely. "They mark the pond's center. I can sight the notch and judge how fast the water rises, so know how high to stack the spillway."

"Clever." Robin nodded absently. "And as you've spied since dawn, have you seen Courtland?"

"Courtland?" The sheriff wiped his face again, then folded his kerchief. "You mean, who clerks for you? No, I've not seen him. He's nothing to me."

Robin would have thought the last comment odd, but profit mattered to Garrett, not people. "He's gone missing in the night. Nowhere in the village, and I doubt he'd brave the forest. So I wonder if he's not ta'en by Sir Laird of Mount Royal. The knave's snappish and bloody-minded. He may've come back to finish cracking Courtland's pate. I suggest we ask Sir Laird his whereabouts last night."

"Eh? Sir Laird?" The sheriff peered as if Robin babbled nonsense, then seemed to understand. "Oh, aye! A'course! I'll walk up the hill and talk to 'im. We can't have knights accosting our clerks and gettin' away with't."

"Good." Robin was surprised by the sheriff's easy obedience, but then he excelled at inspiring others to duty. "I'll go with you lest he draw steel."

"What?" The fat sheriff blinked. "Oh, no, m'lord, you needn't do that. I'll go alone. Here, you take sumpin' home to your cook. I know Lucy. She can bake a rare fine crust."

Before Robin could object, the sheriff grabbed a long-handled net and basket from his low boat. Waddling down the embankment to the spillway, where the water sank deep, he dipped the net. Green coils boiled, and the net came out bulging. Garrett dumped the writhing load in the basket, then held it to Robin Hood with a grunt.

In the basket roiled a dozen eels. Dark shimmering green, a cubit long, the creatures had beady black eyes, fanning gills, needle teeth, and a rippling fin running half around their bodies. As the eels thrashed and squirmed, slime oozed through the basket's weave. The topmost creatures would have spiraled and pitched out but for the sheriff's deft jiggling of the basket.

"They'll settle soonest. Make sure Lucy bakes 'em all a't'once. Water snakes gotta be fresh."

"I shall, good Sheriff, and my thanks." The basket quivered in

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Robin's hand, and he leaned back lest slime spatter him. "I'll have a boy fetch it home. You'll need a good right arm to tame Sir Laird. I've handled criminals, having associated with such, same as our Lord Jesus."

"Jesus? Jesus." Garrett tugged off his battered round hat and smoothed his sparse curls. "Very well, m'lord. I'll just fetch my stick . . . "

The walk up the hill, hardly a "mount," was refreshing to Robin Hood but taxing to the sheriff. They found neither manse nor keep, just an outsized hunting lodge built of stone and beams with a stable, kennel, and mews. Dogs barked at the arrivals, and Robin bid a stablehand fetch Sir Laird.

The rawboned knight buckled on his baldric and sword as he bustled from the hall, no time even for helmet or hat. "What's this? I didn't summon either of you!"

"Sir Laird." The sheriff waggled his walking stick as if berating a child. "We've come to arrest you for murdering Courtland, the forestry clerk."

Robin Hood stifled a groan. He'd have concealed their mission and vied for an unguarded confession. But Garrett was the law.

"What?" Sir Laird goggled like the popeyed hawks on his gray gypon. Behind, doghandlers and stablehands pricked their ears. *"Murder?* The boy barely grazed the door post! He was sitting up when I left, dazed and n'more! Now begone b'fore I loose the dogs on you!"

The fighting man faced a fat sheriff and a vagabond with a weapon-knife, so he slapped a hand to his sword and exposed a foot of keen steel to send them packing—

In an eyeblink, Robin Hood slammed his left hand against the knight's protruding elbow. Laird's own arm banged his face, stunning and blinding him. Robin's right hand caught the knight's pommel, whisked the blade from the scabbard, and flung it backhanded down the road. Stooping, Robin caught a boot and wrenched skyward. Hoisted heels over head, Laird's skull slammed dirt so hard he lost a patch of hair. A deerhide boot stamped on his stomach.

"That's grazing the ground," growled Robin. He leveled a finger at the knight's retainers, who stayed put. "Twice you've drawn steel, Sir Laird. Was it thrice during the night?"

"Night?" Breathless, the knight wheezed from the ground. "I was abed by night! Ask my squire!"

"Who?" Robin barked. An older man with weak eyes answered, then recited in detail the knight's hours, all spent at home.

"Then explain this." Sheriff Garrett had wandered away, Robin realized, but now returned. In his fat palm lay three objects: a worn ring inscribed *Pensez de moi* and two bronze tips snipped from a

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leather belt. "I found these in saddlebags in the stable. Where did you hide Courtland's carcass, Sir Laird? Down a well or under a manure pile? Or did you leave him in the woods for the wolves?"

"You're mad!" The knight puffed under Robin's foot on his gut. "Those things were never in my saddlebags! Someone's put them there!"

"Arise yerself, m'lord." The sheriff tilted his walking stick at a jaunty angle. "We'll walk to the village."

Dazed and dazzled, with Robin Hood clutching his elbow, Sir Laird stumbled down the hillside into captivity.

"So Sir Laird's hauled off in chains to the prison in Southampton, 'attached by the body,' as our bailiff put it. Swears he's innocent. He even apologized for striking Courtland, though Courtland's not around to hear it. Still, I mislike it." Seated at the long trestle table with Marian, Robin washed his hands in water laced with rose petals, then accepted a tall fresh-brewed ale. He sipped small to keep a clear head, and spooned oxtail soup. "Mostly I wonder, why should Sir Laird kill Courtland? To hold a grudge—"

"You're the one holds the grudge." Marian pointed her spoon. "Sir Laird abused his authority, true, but you condemn him as the Antichrist."

"The man's a brute, Marian. He's quick to draw steel."

"'Quickest hot is quickest cold.' Did any of Sir Laird's huntsmen see him go and come? Ahorse, for a knight never walks? Did dogs bark by night? Did his squire tell how he spent the night?"

"Yes, but you can't believe him. And the sheriff found Courtland's jewelry in Laird's saddlebags—"

"You're not thinking, Rob! Sir Laird didn't fly through the air. Was he seen in the village? Were hoofbeats heard? No one in Lyndhurst owns a horse but you and he. Did Courtland's landlady see—"

"Is that *eel pie?*" beamed Robin as a maid bore a steaming pastry to the table. Robin dug into a thick slice, sucking flakes from his fingers and smacking his lips, while Lucy the cook simpered in the doorway. Chopped in thumbwidths, with green skins peeled off, the eel meat proved soft as white bread and fragrant as the ocean. "Here I maligned Sheriff Garrett as a miser."

"Must be the moon." Stoically Marian ate her pie rather than waste it. "He's gone queer too. Working hard, giving away eels, arresting a criminal like a real sheriff. Why does he do your bidding and then bribe you?"

"Garrett's nothing to ponder." Robin signaled for another slice of gooey pie. "It's Courtland who's wandered off or been killed. As you say, if no one saw Sir Laird or Courtland . . . 'Haps the boy was spirited off."

"Oh, nimble wit. Blame the devil for the trespasses of men."

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Marian rolled her dark eyes, then conceded, "There's a thought. Courtland wasn't dragged from his home, so he must've gone willingly. What could send him haring about at night?"

"Love? Catting? I doubt he poaches." Mouth full, Robin shrugged. "If he were affrighted for his life, figuring Sir Laird knew where he slept—"

Fast as a mink, Marian whisked Robin's plate from under his nose. "Stop stuffing and *think!* And *forget* Sir Laird! What *else* could've set Courtland wandering?"

"In the office? Nothing." Robin reached for his plate, but denied, drained his mug. "Nothing goes on ever. The clerks scrape parchments and ink them anew, then do it again! Which is foolish, since even Sloan can't fathom false from true!"

"False from true? Oh, yes, the counterfeits." Marian froze, trencher hanging in the air. "You said Sir Laird protested that his fine was too high, yet the higher tally was writ down. Did Courtland hear Sloan complain of these false documents?"

"Eh?" Robin squinted. "Uh, aye. Yes. He sat nursing his head, said he was dizzy."

"Aha!" Marian returned Robin's trencher with a clatter. "Finish your pie. We needs take a walk."

Courtland rented the loft of a cottage owned by a freeholding widow. After some hesitation, the landlady allowed Robin, as Courtland's master, to search his room, though she looked askance at Marian in a man's attire. The two outlaws climbed the short ladder and hunched under roof beams and thatch smoked by soot. Kneeling, they looked around by the light of a rush lamp.

A rope bed with rumpled blankets. A chamberpot underneath. A three-legged stool. Clothes hanging on pegs. A spare pair of scuffed shoes. Two stacked chests, the upper one locked.

Smudges marred the small chest's lid. Marian rubbed a black streak and tasted her finger. "Vitriol. You dissolve it in oak-apple water to make ink. Break it."

Robin Hood twisted the lock and tore the hasp from the wood. Marian opened the lid. "Aha! More scripts!"

"Grand." Robin yawned, for the hour was late and the loft warm. "Sloan will be glad to get more."

"As am I." Squinting in the wan rush light, Marian shuffled scraps of all sizes. "Look!"

Robin pretended to look, even gave an intelligent grunt. "In'eresting."

"Noooo." Marian caught his nose. "Some problems you can't solve with a bow, says my husband. *Look.* What's this top sheet signify?"

Reluctant but obedient, Robin studied a parchment so old its edges crumbled. "I see . . . scratchy Latin."

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"Blessed Saint Hildegard!" gasped Marian. "The same legal passage is enscribed three times—here, here, and here—but in three different hands!"

Robin Hood looked blank.

"Oh, Rob, you're so honest it's painful. Why would a man practice to vary his handwriting?"

"To copy—no. To match—" Feeling slow as Much the Miller's Son, Robin pieced it together. "Courtland's our forger."

"Yes! It explains how false scripts infest the forestry office! Courtland forged deeds and sold them to unscrupulous landowners so they could lay claim to neighbors' land, or the king's property in the forest, and reap its profits!"

"Sold the forgeries for money, you mean." Robin rooted through scraps and stripped quills to feel the bottom of the chest. He found only a few half-crowns and silver pennies. "Where's his fortune?"

"He must've buried it out back." Marian waved a hand. "Everyone does that. Otherwise invites robbery. And some wealth he wore: Remember his fancy ring and belt tips? D'ya see? Sloan complained about finding forgeries while Courtland lay listening. The guilty fled where none pursued!"

"Jesus shall judge the quick and the dead," said Robin absently. "So he fled here, thence into the night. Why? And where?"

"That I don't know," Marian conceded with a huff. "But I'm sure the answer is here. Sit. Let me read."

Robin lolled, half-dozing. Marian read parchments, her finger and pouty lips moving. "The rogue forged whate'er profited. No surprise, I suppose. He had access to every document in the forest. The fox guarding the chickens . . . See how these're scraped thin? I'll bet he changed the amounts of some fines, skimmed the excess, then changed the numbers back. So Sir Laird was right: His fine *was* too high . . . Oh, my, real paper: That's expensive! A letter of introduction . . . Perhaps Courtland was *too* bold. A fraudulent deed bonds forger and buyer in secrecy, but who can trust a thief? This is a fair bill . . . Oh, my, a royal charter—*Uhh!*"

Marian startled as Robin's hard hand clamped her wrist like a bear trap. He said, "I know where Courtland sleeps!"

Past midnight, the outlaws slid down a hill and left the woods. The vale of Lyndhurst was a black bowl striped silver by the moon. The lower pond glittered, its surface dimpled as eels nipped at water beetles.

Marian ascended a dyke to keep watch. Ankle-deep, broadaxe in hand, Robin waded the putrid stream to reach the spillway. It was high as he could reach with the axe. Pairs of stout posts supported crosswise logs and saplings chinked with moss and grass. Only a

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little polluted water spilled over or trickled through the barrier. On the nether side brimmed thousands of gallons.

For the nonce.

Marian lay on the bank and watched the vale, but only a few curious cows grazed by moonlight. She whistled like a quail's "Wet my lips!" One call for *Go ahead.*

Bracing his feet on slimy rocks, Robin Hood slung the axe far back and swung low. The steel tooth bit a dark post. Swinging high, the archer knocked loose a kerf of white wood that floated away in the black stream. Quickly he chopped away half the post, then crabbed around and attacked the other. Soon only three fingers of wood held up the posts—and a wall of water.

Robin paused to hone the axe with a whetstone from his belt pouch. Pale moonlight was shadowed by earthen walls, so he held the blade close to his nose. He hissed, "Anyone?"

"No," buzzed Marian, "but it's loud."

"Can't be helped. And t'will be noisier anon."

Pocketing the whetstone, Robin aimed for the two white vees. He chopped alternate sides, shifting his feet on the treacherous stream bed, ears alert. Under one blow, the high wall of logs and saplings groaned. Water spurted from cracks, stinking of cows and eels and garbage. Robin clamped his mouth shut and sucked wind through his nose.

He smacked loose another chip and felt a tremor through the axe handle. Crouching and squinting in darkness, he debated whether to strike again or to clamber up the bank and push.

"Someone comes!" chirped Marian.

From the darkness charged more darkness, a ragged shape like a haystack toppling. It dashed around the curved dyke opposite from Marian. A straight line above its head gleamed like silver in moonlight.

For an instant Robin Hood panicked, fearing a ghost, then he realized who the blocky attacker must be and what it carried. Silver flashed an arc as Robin canted the axe haft over his head in both hands.

A sword chunked on the axe's ash handle. Robin didn't wait for the next blow, but slung axe and sword aside, and punched. The blow connected with something soft that elicited a grunt, so Robin punched again. The ragged assailant curled around Robin's fist and collapsed, sword and attack forgotten. Grabbing folds of cloth, the outlaw yanked hard. The attacker plashed into the stream bed at Robin's feet.

Wood snapped. Marian yelped.

A cataract sprayed Robin Hood. A spinning eel struck his cheek. Whirling, the outlaw jumped for the bank, slipped, and skidded back. Marian snagged his slimy hand and hauled.

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A severed post let go. Logs and saplings burst free. Their twisting weight snapped the other post. Water and eels sucked at Robin's ankles and knees, then he scrambled like a demented squirrel and flopped atop the dyke.

A wall of black water crashed in the streambed and gushed towards the black forest beyond.

The ragged attacker was washed away.

By sunrise, the pond had gurgled to extinction.

Robin Hood stripped and scrubbed his body and clothes in the cow pond, but Marian still hung back from his evil reek. The villagers of Lyndhurst filtered onto the earthen dykes to see the newly-revealed bottom of the eel pond. Then someone shouted from the woods.

Robin and Marian squished not far into the forest. Fat Sheriff Garrett lay befouled, open-mouthed, and staring, with his ratty tunic twisted around his broad belly. His white face was scratched where Robin had slammed him to the rocky stream bed.

"He's drowned!" marveled a man. "Why would he cut down his own spillway?"

"Perhaps something on the bottom needed airing," replied Robin vaguely.

People stared as the erstwhile royal forester and his wife climbed the dyke. Marian made a face. "Oog!"

The stench in the summer morn was stiff as a stone wall. Manure, rotted leaves, animal guts, soured grain, putrid vegetables, and the fishy slime of the eels made a stink so high and hard it was almost visible. The pond bottom was a mire of tree stumps and roots, black leaves and muck. Hundreds of eels flip-flopped in scummy puddles.

Marian covered her nose and mouth with her sleeve. Robin Hood calmly surveyed the bottom. "Ripe as a seven-day pheasant! But wait'll the sun rots these eels! That'll reek—Ho, ho! There he is!"

To Marian's horror and the villagers' amusement, Robin slid down the bank and walked out onto the foul pond bottom. His deerhide boots sank to the ankles in black gunk, but held. He turned. "Marian, will you come?"

"I'll wait—" Marian pulled her sleeve from her face and gulped. "I'll wait here!"

The archer waved lazily, then duckwalked over stumps and roots to the middle, where the sheriff's two tall stakes crossed. Eels pitched and squirmed against his boots.

"Good morrow, Courtland!"

Robin Hood addressed a corpse. The twin stakes pegged it through the ribs to the pond's bottom. Eels had gnawed it, and

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slime coated it from head to toe, but the body wore a green forester's tunic and a slim leather belt missing its bronze tips.

"Waste of a fine hand, lad. Sloan won't be pleased having to do your work too." Robin wiggled and pulled at the stakes, but they were sunk too deep to dislodge, so he retraced his erratic path to the embankment. People stepped back. Marian's face was white as bone.

"You were right, Marian. The answer was hid in those letters," chuckled the husband. "I can stir things up and muddy the waters, but you see clear to the bottom. You found the practice sheet for a royal charter. Sheriff Garrett bought a forged charter from Courtland to build this eel pond on king's land. Garrett profited twice: first selling the felled wood, then growing eels for near naught. But as you said, 'Two can keep a secret if one is dead.' When Sloan complained about false deeds, Courtland feared the game was up. He must've run to the sheriff and demanded money to flee: He could threaten to expose the sheriff's false charter. But thieves fall out. Garrett, the miser, killed Courtland rather than surrender a penny.

"And imagine," Robin laughed, "I watched Sheriff Garrett hammer down the body! Garrett dumped the clerk in the deepest part of the pond, but had to stake him lest the gases float the corpse in three days. I thought the sheriff was blown from exertion, but he was sweating-blood scared I'd caught him in the act! He even gave me eels to go away! But did I notice he was rattled? No! *I* was hot to punish Sir Laird, and Garrett was glad to help! He pretended to find Courtland's jewelry in Laird's saddlebags, when he had 'em in his wallet 'cause he robbed the corpse! I thank the Virgin you stepped in, Marian. You saw the invisible and put me to shame!"

Robin peered at the broken spillway. "I wonder where that axe went? If I cut those stakes, we can lay these jolly bedfellows in a Christian grave. Gad! Another few days, and those eels'd've eaten Courtland hoof, hide, and hair!"

"Rob," Marian gulped, "we ate of these eels."

"Oh, aye, but I've et worse. Grasshoppers and rats and horse lights at Acre, washed down with ditch water so scummy and buggy you had to strain with your teeth. Eels that've drilled a dead man are nothing. 'The fouler the food, the sweeter the meat.'" Robin dusted his hands on his seat. "Yes, I'll say again, Marian, you've a sound head."

Marian didn't hear. She'd staggered down the ditch to retch.

Robin Hood glanced after, then shrugged. "A weak stomach, maybe, but a sound head." ●

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Art by Mark Evans

THE LAST PAGE

by John H. Dirckx

The second thing Albert Newby heard that morning—after squelching the clamor of his windup alarm clock with a rap of his gnarled hand—was the steady dripping of water in the furnace room. From that he deduced that it had rained again during the night and was probably still raining.

As he rolled out of bed and fumbled across the dark cellar to what passed for a bathroom, he was tallying up the pros and cons. Rain meant more trouble with his arthritis, but not so many customers to work around. More mildew in the books on the basement level, but fewer messes to straighten out on the shelves. Then his thoughts got jumbled in their usual morning fog.

A splash of cold water in the face (there was no water heater on the premises) cleared away some of the fog. But he knew there was only one thing that would really set him right, and there wasn't any of that on the premises, either.

Newby was in the back room on the main level making coffee when Hallpine knocked with an elbow on the iron-bound door from the alley. He came in dripping wet and laden with hot breakfast

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for two in plastic cartons from the restaurant on the corner. These he dumped on the already cluttered worktable in the clumsy, abstracted manner that characterized everything he did.

"Gutters are flooded," he said. "How's the cellar?"

Newby held his hands a couple of feet apart to show the width of the principal puddle in the furnace room. "Where would I be if there was a real flood, Roy, and you couldn't get through?"

"I guess you'd be right here." Hallpine poured himself some coffee and only then thought to slip off his jacket, with the result that he dashed half an ounce of coffee over a sleeve already sodden with rain.

"Shouldn't I have a couple dollars in reserve in case I ever have to go up the street and get my own breakfast?"

Hallpine put down his cup and opened a carton of scrambled eggs. "Listen, you old fox," he said, "we've got an agreement, remember? Are we going to have to put it in writing? You hand over your Social Security check to me every month, sweep the floors, dust off the books, and keep them in order on the shelves. In return, you get a bed and three square meals a day, and clothes when you need them. No cash to change hands—ever. You know what you buy when you have cash, Newby. And we both know what it does to you."

Newby hung his head like a whipped dog and attacked his breakfast with hands whose trembling the coffee would only make worse. They ate standing up in the musty, dusty back room because all four of the stools around the table were stacked with books. And they said nothing further because, having had their ritual exchange about a cash dole for Newby, they had nothing further to discuss.

After breakfast, Hallpine busied himself in unpacking and pricing two crates of books he'd bought the day before at a library sale. Newby retired with a second cup of coffee to his sanctum in the cellar, to nurse his grievances in sober solitude. Later he swept the cement floor in the part of the basement that was part of the store, where rain water never leaked but dust filtered down unceasingly from above. He was straightening up the Foreign Languages section under the stairs when he heard Hallpine answering the first phone call of the morning.

The number of African-American protagonists in short detective fiction is, regrettably, small. One of the most notable series heroes is John H. Dirckx's Detective Sergeant Cyrus Auburn, who has starred in many tales for *EQMM* and its sister publication *AHMM*. In this new outing, Auburn finds himself in a used bookstore, where despite the challenges his ethnicity presents in questioning suspects, he manages to prove whodunit. †

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"Last Page Books . . . Yes, we do . . . That depends on what they are . . . No, we can't use condensed books . . . I *know* who publishes them, but we still can't use them . . . Sir, we are merchants, all right? Condensed books don't sell, all right? I'd rather try to peddle ice cubes in Antarctica than— Well, the same to you."

From his quarters in the cellar, Newby could look straight up through an opening where a heating duct had formerly passed and catch glimpses of Hallpine puttering behind the front counter, mumbling to himself, shifting stacks of books, writing himself memoranda, searching for lost articles, and generally creating and perpetuating his own peculiar brand of turmoil and confusion.

The phone rang again. "Last Page Books . . . Yes, we do . . . We'd have to see them to quote a price . . . You need to bring them in— . . . Ma'am, you need to bring the books in to the store, all right? . . . Ten to ten, seven days."

At 9:30 Hallpine unbolted the front door to admit Lark, the part-time salesgirl, and immediately bolted it again. "I want to talk to you," he said before she could slip off her leather jacket.

"What about?"

"Couple things. First of all, you're getting paid to run this counter when I'm in the back room or out on a buy."

"Okay." Newby couldn't see her from the basement, but he could readily envision the sullen pout that went with that vocal inflection.

"So no more company in the back room, all right?"

"We were working on a project."

"Not on my time, all right? Second thing, this is a business, not a public charity. You priced some of those paperbacks from Pine Ridge School under a dollar."

"They're all dirty. You only paid a dollar for the whole box."

"That's not your concern. Your dad didn't get where he is by giving away furniture." He paused to shout at someone who was knocking at the front door. "We're not open yet. Ten o'clock. *Ten o'clock*, all right?"

Newby heard Lark's plastic heels clacking pertly on the bare wood floor above as she went to deposit her jacket in the back room and get a cup of coffee.

A little before ten, Hallpine turned on the radio behind the counter and made the rounds of the main level and the mezzanine, switching on every other light. "Hey, Newby," he called down through the hole behind the counter. "You still with us?"

Newby responded with an inarticulate grunt.

"Captain to engine room. Put on the lights down there. I'm opening up."

For the next hour or so, Newby worked steadily at his job, shuffling up and down the aisles with stacks of newly priced books to set out in the proper sections, repeatedly trying to restore order to

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shelves repeatedly disarranged by heedless customers, and dusting as he went with a long strip of rag that had once been part of a flannel shirt.

The phone rang often, and when Hallpine wasn't haggling with a customer at the counter over the price of a book, he was insulting a prospective customer on the phone. The rain stopped and started again. At each lull, a handful of customers drifted out and another handful drifted in.

It was still raining—a soft spring rain that seemed prepared to continue unabated for days—when Detective Sergeant Cyrus Auburn arrived at the bookstore and tried to find a place to park. The store stood in the middle of a business block whose heyday had come and gone before World War II. On one side was a dry cleaner's, patronized mainly by people who bought their clothes secondhand, and on the other a plumbing-supply store that looked as if it hadn't sold a brass washer since Christmas. A police cruiser was double-parked in front of the bookstore with its lights flashing, and the coroner's van was double-parked behind the cruiser. Auburn pulled in at the rear of the parade.

Three or four delegates from the neighborhood idlers' association stood under a leaky awning and peered in through a plate-glass window that bore the stenciled inscription: "THE LAST PAGE. USED BOOKS BOUGHT AND SOLD." A cardboard sign inside the glass door said CLOSED, but as Auburn skipped among the puddles up to the door, it was thrown open and quickly shut again behind him by a uniformed policeman.

The heavy, musty atmosphere inside the store reminded him of the closed porch at his grandmother's house, which for several decades had harbored an ever-growing hoard of magazines, newspapers, and empty shopping bags. The fluorescent ceiling lamps shed a harsh light over the interior of the store, which stretched back, a long narrow cavern, to barred windows facing the alley.

The sales counter stood in a niche near the front of the store. Stamaty, the coroner's investigator, was stooping over a body on the floor behind the counter, making a thorough examination with the aid of a flashlight.

Auburn shook the rain from his hands and arms and surveyed his surroundings. Crude plank shelves, sagging beneath their burden of books, lined the walls and filled every available space. Between the tops of the books and the shelves above, other books had been wedged in sideways wherever they would fit. There were books all over the floor as well, some of them in cardboard boxes and others heaped up in lopsided stacks that threatened to topple at the slightest touch. The worn and uneven floorboards

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were innocent of any covering except dust, which wet shoes had been working into a grimy paste all morning.

The glass counter behind which Stamaty was awkwardly crouching looked like a relic from a nineteenth-century general store. The counter and the shelves behind it swarmed with books, loose papers, pencils, marking pens, Manila envelopes, spare light bulbs, bottles of glue, rolls of tape, scissors, rumpled plastic bags, wrapping paper, and other articles in incredible disarray.

Towards the back of the store, in a narrow space overhung by a sort of gallery or mezzanine, stood four people—a sobbing woman and three men of assorted ages—all studiously ignoring one another.

"Is she family?" Auburn asked the uniformed officer under his breath. The officer had a clipboard in his hand and his name tag read PTL. J. SCHOTTEL.

"No. Employee."

"Has the next of kin been notified?"

"They're checking downtown. He was divorced. No children; parents not living."

"Were any of these people in the store when he was killed?"

"Apparently three of them were. The gentleman in the hat says the victim was already dead when he came in."

"Have you got statements from all of them?"

"Preliminary."

"Have you been over the place pretty thoroughly?"

"I think so. I found the older gentleman downstairs in a D. U. double H. He works here, too."

"You found him in a which?"

"Dwelling Unfit for Human Habitation. Besides, it's against the Municipal Code to reside on business premises."

Auburn stepped to the counter. "Well, Stamaty, is he dead or not?"

Stamaty moved aside to give Auburn a clear view of the deceased—a man in his forties, lean and wiry, with long gray hair in a ponytail, wearing threadbare military fatigues. He lay on his right side on the floor in the cramped space behind the counter, next to a short wooden stool that also lay on its side. Stamaty used his flashlight to point out and illuminate the dead man's dented and discolored left temple.

"Find the weapon?" asked Auburn.

"Not yet." Stamaty put away his flashlight. "I'm going to get some pictures before I move him," he said. He went out to his van for his camera case and other paraphernalia.

"Are we pretty sure this wasn't an accidental fall?" Auburn asked Patrolman Schottel.

"Oh, I'd say so. I think you'll agree when you put these folks' stories together."

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Auburn caught the eye of the gentleman in the hat and beckoned him to the front part of the store and out of sight of the others.

"Your name, sir?" He fished a three-by-five-inch file card out of an inside pocket and, using a pile of old magazines as a desk, prepared to make some notations on it.

"Clyde Rundening." The hat was light blue felt, still damp, and it went well with the opulent but tasteful business suit. Rundening was about forty, with heavy, sallow features but quick and intelligent eyes behind thick lenses. Under his arm he carried a thin leather briefcase with a zipper around three sides.

"Your address? Home phone?"

"I already gave all that to this officer here." Evidently Rundening belonged to that undying breed that don't appreciate finding an African-American in their part of the bus, let alone in the driver's seat.

"What can you tell me about what happened here?"

Rundening shrugged. "As I told this officer, I came in to see Roy Hallpine about an overdue account he had with us."

"What kind of business did you do with Hallpine?"

"We printed catalogues for him."

"The name of your firm?"

"I own my own business." He fished a business card from an inner pocket. "Which means I have to do all the dirty work myself, including dealing with cheap crooks who think they can hustle—" He fell abruptly silent.

"How was Hallpine trying to hustle you?"

"He was trying to break into the used college textbook market—compete with the national chains. It didn't work out. First he broke his contract, then he quit making payments on all the printing and graphics work we'd done for him."

The phone behind the counter rang. Stamaty picked up the receiver, said, "We're closed," and hung up again without interrupting the rhythm of his work.

"What time did you get here?" Auburn asked Rundening.

"Right around noon. I didn't have an appointment, because Hallpine wouldn't make appointments. I came to see him today because I happened to be right up the street seeing another client."

Auburn nodded. "Go on."

"At first I didn't notice anything wrong. My glasses were wet and I took them off to dry them. Hallpine was sitting on the stool back there in the corner of his cubbyhole, but I couldn't see him very well because that box was in the way."

Stamaty was shooting flash pictures from various angles. Two people still loitered on the sidewalk in the rain, peering in even though they couldn't see the body where it lay behind the counter.

"Was there anybody on this side of the counter?"

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"I didn't see anybody, but as I said, I had to take my glasses off to clean them. Before I got them back on again, I heard this hellacious crash, and Hallpine fell down behind the counter, and the stool went over with him. I stepped closer to the counter to see if I could help him, but somehow I knew he was already dead."

"And you didn't see anybody else near him?"

"No, nobody. After he fell, that girl came out of the private office at the back. When she saw him she started screaming, and then the man with the beard came up from the basement. He's the one who called the police."

"Has anybody left the store since you came in?"

"Not that I know of." He edged towards the door. "Do you need me anymore, Officer? I've got an appointment at one."

Auburn sent him on his way and beckoned the girl forward. She was about twenty, meager and bony, with a tight little face like a fox that has been out on the chase all night. One glance at her outfit ten minutes earlier had told him that she was a college student. She was still sniffling and she made a point of not looking behind the counter.

The phone rang again, and this time Stamaty took it off the hook and left it off. Auburn took the girl into the alcove at the front, where he'd interviewed Rundening, and got out another file card.

Her name was Lark Balcon. She'd been working for Roy Hallpine since the beginning of the fall term last September. He was a friend of her father's. Their relationship was strictly business. She worked twenty hours a week. Her duties were to help customers find things, price paperbacks, and clean books and make them presentable by removing library covers and labels and erasing pencil marks. In Hallpine's absence she sold books at the counter. She wasn't allowed to buy books, price hardbacks, or give discounts to dealers. Her father had told her Hallpine was divorced. Otherwise she knew nothing of his personal life or associations outside the store.

"What time did you come in this morning?"

"Nine-thirty."

"Is that your regular time?"

"On Tuesdays and Fridays it is."

"Was Hallpine here already?"

"Yes. I don't have a key to the store."

"Was anybody else here when you got here besides Hallpine?"

"Just Newby. That old man back there. He lives in the cellar."

"I understand he works here, too."

"Sort of. When he's not too drunk to stand up."

"Was he here in the store all morning?"

"Yes. All three of us were here."

"Lot of customers in and out today?"

"Off and on. Because of the rain."

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"What about the man back there with the beard? Is he a customer?"

"Yes. I don't know his name but he comes in every two or three weeks. He always argues about prices. And other things."

"Was he arguing with Hallpine this morning?"

"I didn't hear them. I was in the back room."

"When was the last time you saw Hallpine alive?"

"I don't know. Maybe about eleven-thirty or a quarter to twelve. He came to the back room to tell me he was going up to the corner at twelve o'clock to get some lunch for all of us, and I should take over for him at the counter when he left."

"Then what happened?"

"Five or ten minutes later I heard a noise out here. I thought somebody knocked over a pile of books. It happens all the time. Then I heard that man that just left—"

"Ever see him before today?"

"Yes. He has a printing business and they did some work for Roy. He was yelling, 'Is anybody here?' "

"And what did you do?"

"I came out of the back room to see what was wrong. The man was standing by the counter. I didn't see Roy on the floor at first—"

"Where was the man standing exactly?"

"Right about here."

"Did he go around behind the counter or touch anything?"

"No."

"Did you?"

"No."

"Was anybody else here in the front part of the store when you came out of the back room?"

"No."

"So what happened next?"

"The man with the beard came up from downstairs and looked at Roy and said we better call the police."

"Did he touch him?"

"He might have. He went behind the counter to get to the phone. And I remember he turned off the radio before he called."

"Did you see anything unusual when you came from the back—besides Hallpine being on the floor?"

"No, except those books and that box shouldn't be there." She stepped nearer the counter.

"Don't touch anything." A stack of eight or ten books stood on the counter next to a cardboard box with its flaps tucked in. A scattering of dark, damp spots on the top and sides of the box were presumably remnants of raindrops.

"Roy must have bought those right before he got killed."

"Who from?"

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"I don't know. Somebody who brought them in to sell. That's where half the books in the store come from."

"Is there a cash drawer here behind the counter? Just show me. Don't touch it."

He pulled the drawer open with a pencil to reveal a well-stocked coin tray and a few small bills in disorderly stacks. "Look like any money's missing?"

"Yes. There should be some rolls of dimes and quarters in the back. We always have three or four of each."

"Was the drawer usually unlocked like this?"

"It was when somebody was at the counter."

"Is this all the cash you keep in the store?"

"No. Roy kept most of his cash in his pocket. He always carried a big roll of bills with a red rubber band around it."

Stamaty was packing up his equipment. "There's no cash on him," he said, before Auburn could ask. Their eyes met briefly.

Auburn turned back to the girl. "Do you see anything else out of line here at the counter?"

She shrugged helplessly. "How could you tell? It's always such a mess. There's usually a hammer here on the counter, but I don't see it now."

"What kind of hammer?"

"A big one. Roy used it as a paperweight because the wind blows things off the counter whenever somebody opens the door."

Patrolman Schottel, who had been hovering importantly inside the front door, now began searching for the hammer, rooting among the litter, overturning stacks of magazines, and generating a great deal of dust and noise.

"Does the older gentleman ever work here at the counter?" Auburn asked the girl.

"Newby? No. At least, not while I'm here. I know he doesn't have a key to the cash drawer, and I wasn't ever supposed to let him have mine."

Auburn stepped back into the main aisle and looked for Newby, but only the man with the beard was there, rocking gently from side to side as he killed time by pretending to study the spines of cookbooks. Auburn walked back towards him. "Where's the older gentleman who was here a minute ago?" he asked.

The man with the beard looked through Auburn with sullen contempt. "He just ducked out the alley door."

"He'll be back," said Lark. "He's probably up the street at Gallion's trying to bum drinks."

Stamaty was on the phone arranging for the removal of the body.

Auburn turned his attention to the remaining witness, a man of about thirty-five who wore his beard trimmed so short and even that it looked like a vast smear of dirt over the lower half of his

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face. A large cloth bag evidently containing something heavy was slung over his shoulder by a strap.

"Your name, sir?"

"Arch Lassoon."

Auburn recorded identifying data on a file card. "About what time was it when you came into the store this morning, Mr. Lassoon?"

"Probably about a quarter after eleven."

"Did you notice anything unusual when you came in?"

"Nope. Same old garbage dump."

"Were there other customers here?"

"There were other people in the store." Lassoon seemed determined not to give up anything without a struggle.

"Was Hallpine behind the counter?"

"Yep. And he was alive. At least he was when I went downstairs."

"How long were you down there?"

"Maybe fifteen or twenty minutes."

"And then what?"

"Then I heard him fall, and the dude started yelling. I came upstairs and saw Hallpine lying there on the floor, dead as the proverbial."

"Did you touch him?"

"I felt his neck for a pulse, but you could tell just to look at him that he was gone. Glassy eyes, skin like marble, the whole corpse bit."

"Were those books there on the counter when you went downstairs?"

"I don't think so, but I'm not sure. Can I go get some lunch?"

"In a minute. May I ask what you have in the bag?"

Lassoon bridled, and his mood of amiable sarcasm vanished. "You can ask. That doesn't mean I'm going to answer."

"We think some money is missing from here, and we're going to ask you to submit voluntarily to a personal search."

"You didn't search the dude in the hat. What if I refuse?"

"Then we'll draw our conclusions accordingly," said Auburn. He was getting hungry himself. "You'll probably be arrested."

"Let's get it over with."

Auburn and Schottel took him into the back room, vacant since Lark had left to attend a class. Auburn didn't really expect to find the missing money on Lassoon, but both he and Schottel thought they'd caught a shoplifter. Instead, the shoulder bag turned out to contain a laptop computer wired into a cellular phone.

With the greatest reluctance, Lassoon revealed that he worked for a chain of secondhand bookstores in Illinois, spent most of his time on the road living out of the trunk of his car, and was employed in seeking out valuable books and buying them cheap

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from "idiots like Roy Hallpine." They found nothing incriminating on him and sent him on his way.

Stamaty had taken his equipment out to his van and was waiting now for the mortuary crew to pick up the body.

"You know what that reminds me of?" Stamaty asked Auburn and Schottel, pointing to the sign lettered on the glass. "The Last Page?"

"No," said Auburn, "but I have a feeling we soon will."

"Reminds me of a story I heard on the radio when I was a kid."

"Back in olden days, before the tube?"

"This king gives this magician half his fortune to get this book that tells everything about his whole life—"

"The king's whole life?"

"Right. Past and future. So the king gets the book, and he looks up the entry for that day—and it's on the last page of the book. Sort of gives you the creeps, doesn't it?"

The mortuary ambulance braked noisily in the street, and Stamaty went to unbolt the door for the stretcher crew.

"Were you going to call the forensic lab, Sergeant?" asked Schottel with a hint of reproof, as if he thought Auburn might have forgotten.

"Why don't you take care of that for me, Schottel? Stamaty and I are going out for a little lunch."

It was after two o'clock when Auburn got back to The Last Page. This time he found a parking space on a side street. Schottel's cruiser wasn't in sight. The rain had stopped, and Auburn spent about twenty minutes getting wet and muddy searching behind bushes and down window wells for the elusive hammer.

Kestrel, the police evidence technician, answered his knock at the front door and immediately resumed his work with the petulant air of a chess player whose concentration has been shattered by the arrival of a meter reader. Smudges and deposits of fingerprint powder on windows, doorknobs, drawer handles, and counters now augmented the general untidiness of the place.

"Any sign of a hammer?" asked Auburn. "There's supposed to be one here somewhere. The victim had a blunt wound on the left temple."

Kestrel wore rimless glasses, slicked his hair down with something shiny, and habitually held his back as stiff as a fencepost. "There's no hammer here," he said with his teeth clamped together. He was seldom very communicative while he was working. Besides, he was probably peeved because he hadn't been called in until after the body had been removed from the scene.

"You all alone here?" asked Auburn.

"No."

Auburn set off on a tour of the store to see who else was there, since Kestrel obviously wasn't going to tell him.

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He couldn't help wondering about the economics of a business like this. Even with low rent and cheap labor, he found it hard to see how Hallpine could have made much profit out of the enterprise. He inspected the books on the nearest shelves.

How much demand was there for a paperback entitled *Winning Ways at Table Tennis* with the front cover torn off? What was the fair market value of *Your Quick Reference Guide to Federal Income Tax Savings—1963?* Or the 1908 edition of a book called *Diseases of Poultry,* its covers leprous with mildew? Did anybody collect back issues of *The Forestry Bulletin?* Old paint and varnish catalogues? Crossword-puzzle books with all the puzzles already worked?

Businesses with a much more plausible external appearance than this one often turned out to be covers for illegal operations. Hallpine's murder—committed, evidently, with a weapon found at the scene—had probably been unpremeditated. Had it been the outcome of a drug deal or racket activity gone sour, rather than of a robbery that got a little too violent?

He paced among the crammed and dusty shelves, some of them leaning crazily, and hoped the time wouldn't come when he had to search this place for a stash of crack cocaine or dirty money. In the back office he found more dust and confusion, a thin-gauge steel drum full to the brim with the remnants of a hundred fast-food meals, and a computer whose 115 keys looked as if each had been dusted separately for fingerprints.

The basement stairs creaked and Newby appeared from below, flushed and shuffling and redolent of liquor. "The officer in uniform chastised me for leaving the scene of the crime," he said with exaggerated attention to his diction. "I told him I didn't have anything to do with it, but he said—said you'd be back to give me the third degree." He grinned affably, showing an occasional tooth. "I told him I already have three degrees."

Beneath the outward veneer of a skid-row derelict, Newby retained the speech and bearing of a man of education and refinement. He gave his age as seventy-six; Auburn would have guessed about ten years less. Of course, alcohol was reputed to be a good preservative. And maybe shaving only about once a week kept the wrinkles from forming so fast.

"How long have you been working here, Mr. Newby?"

"Years. I was here before Roy took over the business."

"What are your duties exactly?"

Newby spread his hands in an expansive gesture, and Auburn saw traces of Kestrel's fingerprint ink on them. "I'm the brains of the outfit. Listen. Roy was that far from being illiterate." He held a tremulous thumb and forefinger about an eighth of an inch apart. "He thought a thesaurus was a prehistoric animal. Fact."

"Tell me what happened this morning. As you saw it."

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"I didn't see it. I only heard it."

"Well, then, what did you hear?"

"A crash, there at the counter."

"Where were you at the time?"

"Straight down below. I've got a place down there in the cellar next to the furnace room where Roy had been letting me stay since my kids threw me out."

"What time was it when you heard this crash?"

"I don't know." He smiled coyly. "Whenever it happened. Around noon sometime."

"And what did you do?"

"Nothing. One of the customers yelled for help and I heard everybody in the place con—converging on the front part of the store, so I stayed put. At my age you don't run up a flight of stairs just to satisfy your curiosity."

"And you stayed downstairs until Officer Schottel found you?"

"Correct. That two-bit Perry Mason quoted me chapter and verse of the Municipal Code to prove I wasn't allowed to live in a cellar without natural lighting and smoke detectors and—"

"When you did come up, what did you see?"

"Not much. They told me to stay away from the counter. I did get one look at Roy."

"Did you notice anything unusual here in the store?"

Newby closed his eyes to reflect but opened them promptly when his head and shoulders began to lean out of plumb. "Just that the radio was off. Roy played country-western music up here all day. And I noticed that stuff on the counter."

"You mean those books?"

"And the box." Newby moved towards the counter and took a closer look at the books. "This is where customers put down the books they want to buy. Or sell."

Kestrel's hatchet face popped up behind the counter. "You can handle that stuff all you want," he volunteered. "Nothing there I can use."

Newby ran his eye along the spines of the books stacked next to the box and then quickly reviewed the ones in the box, manipulating them with a dexterity that seemed incredible in view of his condition. "These books are what Roy bought, and the stuff in the box is what he didn't want," he asserted with an air of certitude, and even authority, that it didn't occur to Auburn to question.

"So whoever sold him these books left the ones in the box behind?"

"Correct."

"Is there any way to tell who he bought these from? I mean, would there be some kind of written record?"

Newby emitted a short, rasping chuckle. "Roy didn't even keep

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records of his bank deposits. He thought he could run other people's lives for them, and he didn't even know how to run his own."

"What other people's lives? Yours?"

Newby sidestepped the question. "Five years ago the guy was making his living cleaning out attics and basements and hanging around auction galleries with his truck hoping to make a couple dollars hauling furniture."

"Did he sell anything here besides books? Anything under the counter?"

"Not to my knowledge," replied Newby, looking him as straight in the eye as his state permitted. "As nearly as I could tell, Roy's whole stock in trade was books, arrogance, and insolence."

Kestrel packed up and departed without a farewell.

Auburn got little more out of Newby. The old man had no idea who Roy Hallpine's next of kin might be, or who might have a legal claim on the business. He intended to remain in residence until ejected by the new owner or the police, since he had no place to go, and no money.

He made this last declaration with such an air of self-satisfaction that Auburn felt sure he didn't know that Stamaty, following standard procedure, had removed all the cash remaining in the drawer behind the counter and taken it downtown. He was afraid to ask whether the old man had had any solid food that day.

The sun was shining and the sidewalk was drying out in patches as he carried the books from the counter, both the loose ones and those in the box, out to his car and deposited them in the trunk. Back at headquarters, he reported in to his immediate superior, Lieutenant Savage, and initiated background checks on Hallpine and the four people he'd interviewed. Then he shut himself in his office with the books.

The box was an ordinary cardboard carton, thirteen inches deep and thirteen by sixteen inches in the other dimensions. It had originally contained twenty-four cans of a well-known brand of corn. The cardboard was discolored and brittle with age, and one of the closing flaps had been torn off. There were forty-two books in all, thirty-three of which had been left in the box and nine stacked on the counter. There were seven paperbacks and thirty-five hardbacks.

Even while carrying the books out to his car, Auburn had noticed a potent aroma of stale but probably expensive cigar smoke emanating from them—an aroma radically different from that of the store. This scent became more evident the more he handled the books. Most of them were on history, political science, or international relations, but there were also some directories and a pocket dictionary. No book had a publication date later than 1970.

Auburn went through them one at a time in a vain search for an owner's name. On the flyleaf or title page of nineteen of them

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appeared the initials E.J.D., written with a characteristic flourish and accompanied by dates in the 1950s and 1960s. In one book he found a bookmark fashioned from a Christmas card and in another, the yellowed business card of a life-insurance agent named Rich Ritchie.

Among the books Hallpine had left in the box were an alumni directory from Warwick University School of Law and a roster of members of the State Bar Association for 1968. Auburn shoved the other books aside and concentrated on these two. He started with the alumni directory because it was smaller, and made a list of all the graduates with the initials E. J. D.: Edward John Dambold, Ervin John Danzinger, Edward Joseph Dockerty, Edward Joseph Dockerty II, Edna Jean Dorfman . . . Turning to the Bar Association roster, he found only Dambold and the two Dockertys listed.

Whereas Dambold practiced in another part of the state—or had in 1968—the Dockertys were both local. According to the telephone directory, Edward J. Dockerty II belonged to the law firm of Dockerty, Pannard, and Snell, which had offices about eight hundred feet from where Auburn was sitting. He put the paperback dictionary in his pocket and headed for the elevator.

Edward J. Dockerty II was in, but Auburn had to use his badge and a great deal of persuasion to break into his busy schedule. Their meeting took place in a long narrow room furnished with an oval conference table that shone like glass and twelve upholstered chairs.

Dockerty was a strikingly handsome man, nearing sixty, with hair like spun silver and a complexion like a baby's. His blue eyes were frank and disarming and looked as if they could cut through pretense and pettifogging like a laser beam.

"This will take only a few moments," Auburn assured him. "I'd like to know if you can identify this." He handed over the paperback dictionary.

Dockerty glanced at the initials on the flyleaf, sniffed at the book, and closed both hands around it. "This was my dad's," he said. "Where in the world did you get it?"

"Is your father still living?"

"He died in 'seventy-five. All his books had been packed in boxes long before that, and they stayed in the attic until my mother died last year. Then my sister and I gave most of them to Holy Name Hospice for their annual book sale."

"Most of them?"

"Well, all but a set of Dickens and some leather bindings my sister wanted. May I ask what is the importance of this book to you?"

"It turned up at the scene of a crime and we're trying to trace the last owner."

"It must have been somebody who bought it at the hospice's

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book sale." He sniffed at the book again. "Officer, if this isn't evidence, is there any way I could keep it? I can give you a receipt."

"Never mind the receipt. At this point I haven't got the faintest idea who it belongs to, and if I wanted to find out, I'd have to hire a lawyer."

On his way to Holy Name Hospice, Auburn got caught in rush-hour traffic, and by the time he arrived there most of the administrative staff had gone home for the day. The evening supervisor, an ageless little nun with a pretty face as round as a bun, told him the book sale was held in July, and donations received during the course of the year were stored in a basement.

"What are the chances that somebody stole some of those books?"

She looked at him with owl eyes, and at first he thought she wasn't going to answer. "Somebody did try to steal some of the books just this past weekend," she said finally.

"Was that reported to the police?"

"No, because they caught the person and he gave the books back."

Auburn could neither swallow that whole nor imagine his informant telling a deliberate lie. "Who was he?"

"He doesn't work here anymore."

"Was he fired because of the books?"

"Yes, partly."

"I need his name, ma'am. He's wanted as a material witness in a capital crime, and the sooner I find him, the sooner the whole thing will be cleared up." Her distress was palpable and contagious, but he pressed on. "One way or another, the police can get his name from somebody here, but we don't want to use coercion any more than you would want us to. Just let me have his name and address and I'll take it from there."

It took phone calls to the administrator and the director of human resources, but he got the name.

He stopped for a hamburger at the first place he saw, and while it was being cremated he called in to headquarters. Lieutenant Savage was just leaving for the day. Savage gave him the results of the background checks on the four people who had been at or near the scene at the time of the murder.

All were more or less blank. Lark Balcon was in pre-law and lived with her parents. Her father was a furniture dealer and a member of the school board. Albert Newby had worked as a technical writer and translator for a chemical firm. His claim to have three degrees wasn't quite candid: He had four. Archibald Lassoon's permanent address of record was in Chicago. He had been arrested and fined for participating in a sit-in at a county office in 1977, but that was the full extent of his known criminal career. Clyde Rundening was just what he had said he was, and as clean as a new bathtub.

Royal David Hallpine, 47, was something of an enigma. His

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antecedents were vague, and if he had an ex-wife somewhere, she didn't figure in any local records. According to the preliminary autopsy report, Hallpine had sustained a fracture of the left temporal bone with fatal brain hemorrhage from a torn artery.

Auburn told Savage about the man who had stolen the books from the hospice. When he had finished eating, he called in again and got some background on him, too. He drove through the cool, damp twilight with his car windows open, mulling over the facts and trying to get them into some kind of order.

The roll of bills Hallpine carried on his person was gone, but only some of the money in the cash drawer had disappeared. Besides being robbed, Hallpine had been murdered on public premises during business hours, probably with a weapon found at the scene and now missing. The killer would hardly have acted as he did if he had known there was anyone in the store besides himself and Hallpine. That seemed to let Lark and Newby off the hook. The witnesses told a more or less consistent story that seemed to implicate whoever had brought in the books that had been left on the counter.

Jefferson Street was in a rough neighborhood, and the lower the numbers went, the rougher it got. His knock at 244 interrupted a minor domestic brawl. Mark wasn't home. Probably at Trautmans' up in the next block. What'd he do now?

Mark Corkendale was playing basketball in the alley behind Trautmans'. When Auburn first approached him he looked as if he was going to bolt. He might have tried it if he hadn't been surrounded by half a dozen of his peers. Auburn walked him fifty or sixty paces along the alley to get away from the others and out of the immediate vicinity of the boom box on the Trautmans' garage roof. Moisture from the morning's rain gleamed darkly in the pot-holes.

Corkendale spoke first, aggrieved and aggressive. "I gave those books back," he said with a truculent toss of his head. "They told me they wouldn't call the police if I resigned on the spot."

"Let's talk about the box you didn't give back. The one you sold at the bookstore around noon today."

Corkendale squinted into the murky space between two garages, seeking inspiration and finding none. "I didn't sell any books," he said.

"Tried to sell, then. Look, kid, I didn't pull your name out of a hat. I have witnesses that place you at the scene of a felony. You and I need to go downtown and talk."

"Am I under arrest?"

"Material witness. There's a difference. If you want to be arrested, that can be arranged. With your record, though, I wouldn't advise it. You're not a juvenile anymore." Corkendale had done two stretches at Boys' Industrial School for aggravated assault.

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"What record are you talking about?" Auburn just looked at him. "Okay, okay. Hey, guys, see you later."

At headquarters, Corkendale submitted to a search and declined the services of a lawyer. He had only a few dollars on him.

While he was being taken through the preliminaries, Savage summoned the certified polygraph technician on call, a hard-boiled and excessively cheerful policewoman named Moffat. Savage, Auburn, and Moffat then put their heads together and worked up a list of questions Corkendale would be asked. During the actual test, only Moffat talked with Corkendale. Auburn and Savage, though present in the room, were out of Corkendale's range of vision.

Corkendale admitted that on the preceding Saturday night he had been caught in the act of stealing books from a storeroom at Holy Name Hospice, where he worked as a custodian on the second shift. He claimed he had immediately returned all the books in his car and had been assured he wouldn't be prosecuted on condition that he accepted an immediate dismissal. He denied having retained any books from the hospice and denied ever having been in Hallpine's store.

After an hour, Officer Moffat called time-out. They left Corkendale locked in the interrogation room and adjourned to Savage's office.

"I think he's been puffing like a magic dragon," said Moffat. "His resting pulse is over ninety, and he's throwing premature beats pretty often. Everything I ask him, he gets a little adrenalin rush, and then he drops back to baseline. You heard him tell half a dozen barefaced whoppers about his past iniquities. The machine didn't catch a one of them. The only thing that gave him a twitch was the first time I mentioned the hammer."

"That's not enough to make a charge stick," said Savage.

"What about getting a search warrant and going over his place for the hammer?" asked Moffat.

"Same beef. We haven't got enough evidence to establish probable cause. And I doubt if he took the hammer all the way home with him and hid it in the grand piano." He looked at his watch and stared pensively at the dark window. "I say we let him go and put a tail on him to see if he'll lead us to wherever he dumped the hammer. A long tail, because he's as streetwise as an alleycat."

"Would that long tail be called Cy for short?"

"No. He'd spot you two blocks away. Let's hold him overnight, and after morning report, we'll let Dollinger get a good look at him. When police court opens we'll decide to release him instead of bringing him up. By that time Dollinger can be in plain clothes."

Auburn went back to the room alone. "The machine didn't like some of your answers," he told Corkendale. "We're booking you on

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suspicion of robbery, and you'll come up for arraignment in the morning. Do you still want to wing it without a lawyer?"

"Sure. You guys haven't got anything on me."

"We'll see what the judge thinks about that. Maybe by that time we'll have the hammer." In Corkendale's poker face only the eyes were alive with sullen rancor.

As usual, Auburn woke up next morning full of bright new insights on the case in hand. After Corkendale had been discharged and sent home in a cab with Dollinger in an unmarked car right behind him, Auburn went back to the neighborhood of the bookstore.

His first stop was at Gallion's, a bar and grill about a block north of the store. Here, according to Lark Balcon, was where Newby had probably gone when he disappeared from the bookstore yesterday. The place had just opened when Auburn arrived around ten o'clock. A couple of regulars were leaning on the bar drinking their breakfasts.

The bartender seemed vaguely familiar, but Auburn couldn't place him. He was probably around fifty. In the indirect fluorescent lighting from under the bar, his complexion suggested that of a corpse the embalmer hasn't worked on yet. Auburn showed identification and asked if he knew Newby.

"Sure do. A gentleman and a scholar."

"Was he in here yesterday?"

"Sure was. Couple of times." His voice had a husky burr born of shouting over the noise of the TV and breathing secondhand smoke all day.

"Do you remember what he ordered?"

"Mr. Newby always has a double whiskey with a beer chaser."

"Do you remember what he paid you with?"

"Sure do. Quarters. He had a whole roll of them."

At The Last Page, the street door was bolted. One or two ceiling lamps cast a garish light in the middle of the store, but the place appeared deserted and there was no response to his knock. Going around to the alley, he found the back door ajar to the morning breeze. As he pushed it open and went in, some loose papers fluttered to the floor from the counter at the front.

Auburn went forward to be sure no one was there. He spent some time behind the counter with his flashlight. Then he went downstairs.

Old Newby lay sprawled on his bed in the squalid, humid cellar that was his only home. Two empty liquor bottles stood on the floor, and the alcohol fumes in the atmosphere were strong enough to put a cat into a coma. Auburn tried shaking him, but when the bed threatened to fall apart he resorted to shouting.

Gradually Newby pulled things into some kind of focus. "What time is it?" he asked.

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"Ten twenty-two A.M. Time for some straight answers. Where'd you get the booze?"

"Bought it up the street." He sat up, gripping the edge of the mattress to keep from reeling.

"With what? Yesterday you told me you didn't have any money."

"I bor—borrowed some out of the cash drawer."

"When was this?"

"Yesterday, around noon."

"Where was Hallpine at the time?"

"Sitting up there on his stool behind the counter, high and mighty, and dead as a mackerel. Roy always looked down on me because I feel better and think straighter when I've got a little firewater in my veins. He thought that gave him the right to use me as a flunky and wipe his feet on me."

"Did you kill him?" Newby closed his eyes and seemed to be drifting back into oblivion. "Did you kill him?" Auburn repeated at the top of his lungs.

"I most certainly did not."

Auburn pointed upward at the opening that gaped between two grimy rafters. "If you were down here when it happened, you must have seen who did kill him."

"I didn't see, but I heard plenty."

"What did you hear?"

"Roy was haggling with somebody at the counter. It sounded like a kid, a teenager. He was trying to sell Roy that box of books you took with you. Roy didn't want most of them, and he was only going to give the kid three or four dollars for the rest. When he pulled out his roll of bills, the kid hit him with the hammer and grabbed the cash."

"How do you know the kid hit him with the hammer?"

"Because he threw it down afterwards, and it fell through that hole up there and nearly brained me, too."

"Where's the hammer now?"

"I kicked it back there under the sink."

"And then you went upstairs and helped yourself to some rolls of dimes and quarters."

Newby lay back on the bed and shaded his eyes with a trembling hand. "It was raining hard right then, and I didn't think there were any customers in the store. Lark was in the back room painting her eyelids or something. Yes, okay, I collected some back pay, overtime—I don't know. Anyway, I'm sure I had it owing to me."

First Auburn called Social Services to look after Newby. Then he got Kestrel back to retrieve the hammer, according to departmental protocol and Kestrel's own fussy rules of procedure.

The handle of the hammer yielded a perfect set of fingerprints from Mark Corkendale's right hand. ●

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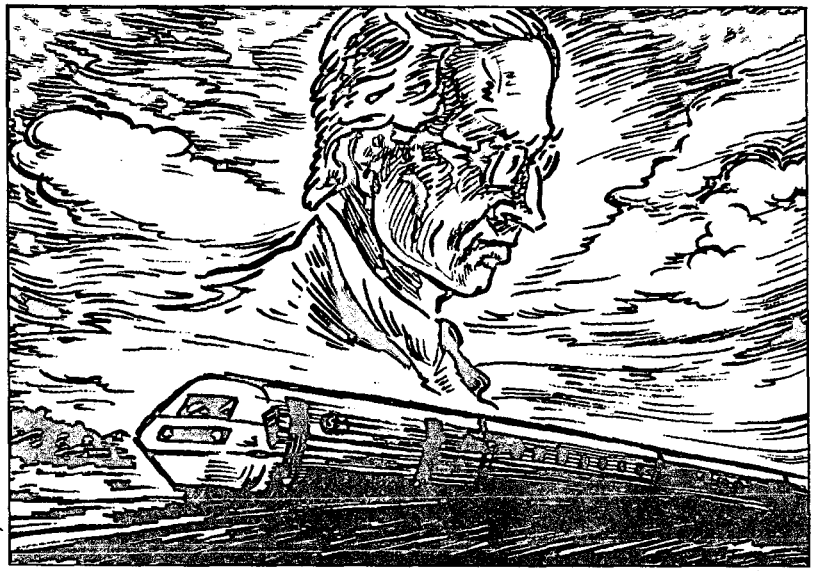

Art by Mark Evan Walker

CASTLES

by Reginald Hill

After the funeral I leave as soon as decently possible.

Maybe a little sooner.

"What are you doing in Mum's bedroom?" demands Harry.

I point to the bedside phone.

"Wanted a taxi," I say. "Didn't want attention."

"You going already?" he asks incredulously.

When I arrived he'd said, "So you came, then?" in exactly the same tone.

I say, "Harry, most of the people here are your mother's friends and family. I think they'll be glad to see the back of me."

"Can you blame them?" he demands. "When they know you're responsible for killing her."

That's a real chiller till I realise it isn't specific.

"A heart attack killed her," I say.

"Because she was living alone, and we all know whose fault that was," he spits out.

From the door, Emily says, "This where you've got to. What's going on?"

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"He's ringing for a taxi. He's leaving," says Harry.

"You off then, Dad?"

"Yes. Sorry. Need to be back in town this evening."

"Keeping busy, eh? That's good. Not too busy to come again soon, I hope."

Doesn't quite get it right, but at least she tries. Harry just glowers.

It's funny, I always favoured Harry over Emily, but when the split came, it was Emily who kept her cool, Harry who threw shit.

I don't bother with any other farewells. York was where Donna came from and York was where she returned. Far as I can make out, she was greeted like a returning prodigal. Me, I feel as welcome as Ian Paisley at a Sinn Fein wake.

Out in the street I use my mobile to raise a taxi. In fact, I've no real reason to hurry back, but even less to hang about in this chilly city. I've got a seat booked on a train in half an hour, but when I reach the station and find a delayed train to London just leaving, I jump aboard.

Everyone else seems to have the same idea and the train is crowded. I get an aisle seat on a table for four with my back to the engine. Never used to bother me, but as I get older I like to see the landscape sliding away rather than rushing towards me as I travel.

Very soon the train rocks me into a waking sleep in which it's not landscape but the past I see sliding by.

I met Donna at my first job. Hers too. She was in the typing pool, prototype provincial lass, starry-eyed and a bit intimidated at her first sight of the Big City. I was the office boy, just as unsure of myself, but coming from Walthamstow, I could put on the airs of a native.

So she made me feel sophisticated, and I made her feel safe.

Not a bad basis for a teenage relationship. Not, maybe, such a great one for marriage.

We got engaged at seventeen. Her parents objected, mine didn't give a damn. Her mother wanted to know if I'd convert to RC. Her father wanted to know if she was pregnant. I told her *why not?* him *yes.* End of objections. My parents still didn't give a damn.

I felt triumphant. So did Donna. After all, we were getting our

Much of the work of Diamond Dagger Award winner Reginald Hill has a comic aspect, particularly the novels and short stories belonging to his Dalziel and Pascoe series. The author's nonseries work, as he says, is often "about characters into whose lives crime comes, sometimes tragically, sometimes comically." The protagonist of "Castles" is someone into whose life crime comes tragically, and without, perhaps, full volition. ✝

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own way, and kids at that age don't have any real idea what they want, except their own way.

There was a moment, just before we left for our brief honeymoon, when I looked around for Donna and saw her in her mother's arms, both of them staring towards me like they'd found a stray dog crapping on their lawn. *What the hell am I doing?* I asked myself. Or rather, *what the hell have I done?*

But God, in His wisdom, deals out such moments of clarity very sparingly to the young.

Now my memory goes into fast forward, sending those early years racing by, which was how they seemed to go at the time. Two kids in quick succession, not a lot of money, me making my way, bustle bustle bustle. And if there was a pause, a brief space for us to look at each other, we didn't use it to take stock, but talked instead of the always mythical future, of some promised land which would make all this present slog worthwhile, of ships coming in, missions accomplished, sunlit uplands, castles in the air. Mine were, I think, the airier. I wanted to travel, to have new experiences, to learn how to sail, to ski, to fly, while Donna had her sights set on a lovely house in a nice area with the kids doing well, a car that didn't break down, an en-suite guest room for her mum to stay in. And so we talked excitedly without really listening to each other.

And then we reached stage two of our journey. My dad had a little greengrocer's shop in Walthamstow. I wanted no part of it, but when my mum died soon after Dad had been diagnosed with Addison's Disease, I started lending a hand. Donna didn't mind. Family loyalties were big in her book. Then an old school chum of mine in the restaurant business asked my help in getting hold of some decent veg. I obliged. He was well pleased and offered me a contract as his regular supplier. And it occurred to me that while small-time retail was drudgery, there might be real money in wholesale.

Now Donna did object, as this meant investing most of our savings, but for once I won a major argument, and after a couple of glitches, we were up and running. In just a couple of years we were able to move to a bigger house in a better area, with much better schools. Things were looking up, and at last life seemed to be slowing down.

The train, too. We're coming into Doncaster. The two people in the window seats get up to leave. I start to shift across till I notice that both seats have reservation tags from Doncaster to King's Cross. I think of moving into one of the other window seats now available but don't bother. There's not much to look at between Yorkshire and London.

People are pouring in from the crowded platform, some narked at being kept waiting, others chuffed to be catching an earlier

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train than expected. There's a wedding party on the platform who look like they belong to the first group. All the usual time-honoured jollities seem to have gone limp with repetition, and though the guests manage to whip themselves into a final frenzy of confetti throwing, balloon bursting, and tear shedding, they can't altogether hide their relief at being shot of the happy couple.

It's not till said happy couple come down the aisle of my carriage that the significance of the reserved window seats strikes me and then it's too late. The only other empty seat visible is the one opposite me.

They can't be more than eighteen or nineteen. His pale, thin features are taut with embarrassment as he tries to brush the confetti off his shoulders. Her broader face, its edges softened with the remnants of adolescent puppy fat or the beginnings of mature obesity, is flushed with excitement and she doesn't seem at all averse to being a centre of attention.

I stand up. I expect him to opt to sit next to me, the kind of meaningless defensive gesture I'd have made at his age. But the girl says, "I like to sit with my back to the engine else I spill my guts."

This seems an unanswerable argument, and they take their seats accordingly.

I do what I can to give them privacy, heading for the buffet and checking for other available seats en route. There aren't any. I have a couple of large scotches, standing up.

Finally I return to my seat, where I immerse myself in one of those magazines in which almost-famous people tell you how marvellous the railway is.

Beside me the bride is in full spate, bubbling through a critical analysis of what their wedding guests had said, worn, and given, ending in what sounds like inappropriately envious speculation about their plans for tonight.

"Lizzie . . ." (Lizzie, I gather, is her best friend) ". . . Lizzie said they'd likely be going down the Parrot, it's disco night down the Parrot tonight, and you get in half price if you get there between eight and half past, and there's a happy hour at the bar . . ."

I try to remember the last time Donna and I went to a disco. And fail. Try to remember happy hours. There were quite a lot of those, but they come up like scenes from an old movie, something I've seen rather than taken part in, with the cold night always waiting for me outside.

After a dozen or so years, the cold night seemed to have come inside too. I felt like I was on a lonely road to somewhere I didn't want to be. Guessing Donna probably felt the same, I tried to bring things out in the open. Faults on both sides, I said. Face it like adults. No need to turn a cold breeze into a blizzard. And even

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if the worst came to the worst, these days divorce was hassle-free, none of the stigma it had for our parents' generation. . . .

Except, it seemed, if you'd married a nice Catholic girl.

Donna wasn't all that religious, but in this one respect she was as devout as the Pope. She'd listened quite calmly till I mentioned divorce, then I turned into Genghis Khan kicking down the door of a convent. I left her screaming and praying and went away to have a think.

It was a long think, nearly ten years long. Funny how quick time passes, even when you're not enjoying yourself. I accepted that divorce wasn't an option, and contemplated simple separation. But things got messy with the kids. I tried to hide the way things were, but I wasn't all that good at concealment and we had trouble with both of them. Possibly we'd have had trouble anyway. Most people do these days. Sometimes I get the impression that any family where the boys aren't delinquent druggies and the girls hysterical anorexics must have something seriously wrong with it.

Then, just to give us a full set of troubles, Donna got ill. Her heart sometimes went off at the gallop. Tachycardia, they call it. No one knew the cause, but top of the list of things to be avoided was stress, and Donna made bloody sure I knew that. Any comment which she interpreted as indicating I still had thoughts of breaking free had her clutching her chest and gasping for her medication. Naturally, I sometimes thought she might be faking, but when I hinted a suspicion to her doctor, she looked at me like I was a serial killer and assured me it was a very real condition which, not properly treated, could be fatal.

This girl next to me is a serial talker. She could gab for Ireland. Her husband tries to insert enough monosyllables to create the impression of a conversation, but it's like chucking pebbles in a millrace to hear the splash. She finishes with the wedding, disposes of their friends, and without pausing for breath starts rolling out their future like turf over a new grave.

Such certainty almost forces admiration. Nothing speculative here, no doubts or hesitations.

This girl's castles in the air have the solidity of bricks and mortar.

". . . and we'll have an old-fashioned cobbled patio, not real cobbles, like, they get right greasy and you can turn your ankle specially in high heels, no, but you can get cobble effect, looks like cobbles but it's flat, and we'll have a barbecue area, gas is best, none of that charcoal stuff that keeps on going out and makes everything smell funny, and a double garage with a flat roof that's a balcony outside our bedroom, so's I can sunbathe without needing to go downstairs, like in that hotel in Ibiza, only a lot bigger,

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well, it would need to be being over a double garage, 'cos we'll need a car each . . ."

I bury my nose in my magazine, avoiding all eye contact with the young man. I know nothing about him, but I know young men and I'd lay odds his vision of the future is at the same time a lot more down to earth and a bit more grandiose.

Or maybe not. We all like to excuse our own guilt and failure by saying everyone's the same. I don't doubt the world's full of unhappy marriages but how can I be sure these kids are going to join the club?

And even if they do, being disappointed, miserable even, doesn't inevitably mean that either of them will end up wishing the other dead.

That's how low I got. I'm not proud of it, but to be fair, the downward spiral was long drawn out.

At first, I kept going by assuring myself that when the kids reached eighteen, I'd simply walk away.

Simply!

Last time things were simple as that, God was still a greengrocer and tailors hadn't been invented.

The kids, like kids usually do, had got through the worst of their teenage traumas without much help from their parents. Emily celebrated her eighteenth by getting married. I thought this was crazy, but I kept my mouth shut and did everything the father of the bride is supposed to do. It was a hollow act. Donna, on the other hand, played her role with utter conviction. That was her great strength. As long as things were going the way she wanted them, she was the perfect mother and wife, leaving no doubt who was the bluebottle in our family ointment.

Emily's husband worked in Harrogate (a Yorkshireman—Donna liked that) so naturally she moved up there. A year later, when Harry reached his eighteenth, he headed north too, to York University to do a degree in Art History. This was a blow. I'd always felt we were really close, and I had hopes he'd come into the business, but there's not much call for art historians in the fruit and veg trade.

Now we were alone again, Donna and me. I tried to talk sensibly to her but immediately she had one of her turns. A close-ish call, said the doctor gravely. Good job she had her medication handy. Recovered, she slipped back easily into her old role of contented wife, and I went along with it because you can't go around telling all and sundry, look, this is a sham, it's all over between us only she won't let me go.

So, a civilised split seemed out of the question. As for walking away, at a distance that had looked a real option, but close up I saw the flaws. To start with, Donna would almost certainly have a

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turn, and she'd pull in a huge sympathy vote. Plus, her family would come at me mob-handed, and their lawyers would be all over my accounts. Competition in the fruit and veg trade had always been keen but in recent years it had become vicious. I couldn't afford the slightest downward shift in either my finances or my personal standing. Being good old Tommy who'd been flogging top-notch produce for years might still tip the balance when some smart young spiv tried to undercut my prices; on the other hand, being rotten old Tommy who'd just dumped his sick wife could give the waverers the excuse they needed to drop me.

But something had to be done. It wasn't just the public pretence that got me down, it was the fact that Donna seemed to expect it in private also. I felt like a jaded actor in some long-running soap who knows there's an exciting life out there with new and demanding parts to be played but can't get out of his contract without getting out of his career.

There was only one solution. If I couldn't leave Donna, then Donna must leave me, which meant that Donna must leave everyone.

It wasn't a decision. I just realised one day that was how I felt. But even at my lowest, I couldn't bring myself to contemplate simply pushing her under a bus.

No, what I opted for was a scheme which had a smack of justice about it. At least, that's how it seemed to me. Here's how it came about. Increasingly, at the slightest sign of opposition to her will, Donna started gasping for breath and reached for the bottle which contained what she called her lifesavers, the pink and white capsules prescribed for her tachycardia. After a short while her heart slowed down to its normal pace and so continued as long as things went her way.

About this time my dad died. We'd never really got on—to the end he always referred accusingly to the wholesale business as if I'd cheated him out of his birthright—but as I cleared out the old house, it seemed to me that I'd been a happy kid there, and finally I shed the tears I hadn't been able to shed at either of their funerals, but maybe they were for my lost childhood as much as for my lost parents.

When I came to empty the bathroom cabinet, I found a supply of Dad's medication. I was just going to tip it down the loo when the idea came to me. Over the years I'd come to understand quite a bit about Addison's disease. It's caused by adrenal insufficiency, which means basically that the adrenal glands don't produce enough adrenalin, and this has to be compensated for by use of one of the cortisone drugs. Now adrenalin, of course, is the hormone that prepares the body for moments of crisis; it sets the heart beating faster, the blood coursing more freely.

This was pretty well the opposite of what Donna was suffering

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from. The function of her medication, the pink and white "lifesavers," was to bring her out-of-control heartbeat down to its normal pace.

It seemed to me that anything which did the job of adrenalin in sufferers from Addison's disease would probably accelerate a tachycardiac patient into heart failure.

It wasn't hard to open up one of Donna's "lifesavers" and substitute a powdered-down cortisone tablet.

When I say it wasn't hard, I mean mentally as well as physically. I felt no qualms at all. My thinking was that if Donna kept herself on an even keel by accepting that other people were also entitled to opinions, hopes, fears, and a measure of independence, then she wouldn't be in any danger. And even if she did resort to her capsules, well, there were at least a couple of dozen in her bottle, and she always kept it well topped up, so that meant she had a better than twenty to one chance of not selecting the ringer. And in any case, I couldn't be absolutely sure that its effect would be fatal.

So easily do we distance ourself from our morally suspect actions.

I wish I could distance myself as easily from this young bride sitting next to me. Having finally run out of steam on her TV commercial vision of their future, she's produced a selection of glossy magazines from which she's started reading aloud any extracts that interest her. As their subject matter seems to be mainly an assessment of those features of male physique and performance most pleasing to a young female readership, I squirm with vicarious embarrassment which I put down to my age and upbringing, till I glance at the husband and see that whatever else has changed, young men haven't lost the capacity for squirming.

It would be nice to be able to offer advice and/or comfort, but what would my lifetime's wisdom amount to? *Son, you've made a big mistake—better you make an excuse at the next stop, leave the train, and run away to sea?* If some old fart had said that to me twenty years ago, I'd probably have decked him. As for comfort, I have none to give. How should I when I can find none?

A couple of weeks after my experiment with the capsules I came home to find the house empty and a letter for me propped up against the clock on the mantelpiece.

> Dear Tommy,
>
> I've been thinking, let's be honest, we're pretty well washed up and with Emily married and up in Harrogate, and Harry settled in at York University, it seems silly for me to carry on living down here in London which, to tell the truth, I've never really liked anyway. So I've decided to move back to York where all my real

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friends and family live, and I'll be within easy striking distance of the children. I'll give you a ring when I'm settled in and we can talk about financial arrangements. I reckon we've done our duty by the kids and by each other for the past twenty years and now we deserve to be able to please ourselves.

Yours affectionately,

Donna.

I should have been jumping for joy. Here she was presenting me with what I'd been wanting for years. Instead I spent the night like a conventionally distraught husband with a bottle of whisky and a generous measure of self-pity.

But next morning I awoke to sunshine and a proper perspective.

I was free! I'd got what I wanted and without any of the expected hassle. Without, above all, becoming a murderer!

The doctored capsule was, of course, still in her bottle. I started trying to plot ways of getting it out of her possession. Then, when we finally met to sort out the final details of the generally very amicable agreement we had reached about money and possessions, she gave me the ideal opportunity.

We were in our London house. She was in the hall talking on the phone and suddenly she called, "Tommy, I've left my bag in the kitchen. Could you be an angel and dig out my diary, please?"

God, it seemed, was at last on my side. I went into the kitchen, found the bag, opened it, and removed the diary.

Then my jubilation faded.

No pill bottle.

After she finished on the phone she returned and started to replace the diary in the bag.

I said, "You're looking very well, Donna. Couldn't help noticing, your bag's not like a portable medicine chest anymore."

"That's right. I had a thorough checkup when I signed on with my new doctor and he gave me a clean bill of health. Isn't that marvellous?"

"Marvellous? Almost miraculous," I said.

She looked at me in search of malicious irony, but there was none. After all, her recovered health solved my last remaining problem, and we parted, if not friends, at least not mortal enemies, and this new neutral zone even extended to include Emily.

But I still paid a large price. Harry.

He seemed to regard the separation as a huge tragedy and he placed the blame very firmly at my doorstep. You'd have thought I'd thrown his mother out into the snow without a stitch on her back. He refused to come back to London and spent the vacations with Donna. And naturally, despite me and Donna keeping things civilised, all her friends and relations in the north took their cue

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from Harry and elected me bastard of the year.

And was I truly happy now I'd got what I had so long wanted?

After the first bout of exhilaration, no. The man who goes into prison is not the same man as comes out. Okay, I can't have been easy to live with either, but when I looked at things with as much disinterest as I could manage, it seemed to me that in the end it had been Donna's castles in the air—financial security, a nice house, a couple of kids grown up and well settled—that had got themselves built, while mine, vaguer, I admit, but just as important to me—excitement, exotic travel, new experience, joy!—were chimeras still.

I feel an urge to try and explain this to the young man in the train, but easily resist. If I can't manage advice or comfort, explanation is definitely a no-no. Who wants to listen to some middle-aged nutter with whisky breath babbling sentimental pap about chasing your dream?

On the other hand, it could be he'd welcome the interruption, *any* interruption. The whole carriage has fallen silent as his bride entertains us with a dramatic reading of the highlights from an interesting correspondence on the ins and outs of oral sex. I can sense the young man's yearning for some diversionary topic. Then, glancing out of the window in search of inspiration, his gaze falls on the ruins of an ancient castle about fifty yards east of the railway line which I recall noticing on the way up.

He says brightly, "Oh look."

She says, "What?"

He says, "Out there. A castle."

She looks, glimpses the ruins briefly before the train bears us out of sight, and says with great contempt, "They're dead stupid, these lords."

What does it mean? A political statement? I let my eyes flicker to the young man's face. He looks as baffled as I feel. More. I don't have a future of such bafflement to look forward to. But that's his problem. I quickly bow my head into my magazine once more, before he can feel intruded upon.

Yes, his problem is the future. Mine is the past. The future is something I don't care to, or dare to, contemplate.

For just as I was beginning to think there might be hope of turning my life around, the news came.

Donna was dead.

It was Emily who phoned me. It was the old heart trouble. She'd seemed so well. Then bang! an attack in the middle of the night. They'd found her in bed with her pill bottle open in her hand.

I couldn't speak for a while. Finally I managed to ask, "Didn't she have time to take her medication, then?"

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"I don't know. What does it matter? She's gone."

It mattered to me.

Had Donna had the last laugh by turning me into a murderer when I'd got all I wanted without going to that extreme?

The answer was in my pocket. That's what I'd been doing in the bedroom when Harry came in. A few moments earlier and he'd have caught me pocketing the medicine bottle I'd removed from the bedside drawer.

It was the criminal's instinct to hide the evidence of his crime, I suppose. Except that in this case, if there was any evidence, there hadn't been a crime. And if there had been a crime, then the bottle contained no evidence.

No, there was more to it than just my attempt to cover my tracks.

I needed to know if she'd taken the doctored capsule or not.

But I wasn't sure yet if I'd ever have the nerve to find out.

The suspicion that I had killed her might taint the rest of my life, but the certainty would destroy it.

I hadn't realised this when I made my plan, or even when I pocketed the bottle, but I realised it now.

You can't end somebody's life without ending your own as well.

It's funny how the human mind can function on two levels, the trivial and the traumatic.

Or maybe it's not funny, maybe it's what makes human existence possible.

Anyway, at the same time as I'm wrestling with my guilt feelings about Donna, I'm also trying to make sense of the young bride's mysterious pronouncement, *They're dead stupid, these lords.*

What on earth did she mean?

I can see the groom is pondering this puzzle, too. If asked, I'd have told him it was probably best to leave well alone. But of course he doesn't ask, so I settle back and wait to have at least one of my problems solved.

It's worth waiting for.

"What do you mean, they're stupid, these lords?" he says finally.

"Well," she replies dismissively. "With all that money, building a castle so close to a railway line, that's really stupid, isn't it?"

I can't help it, my head comes up. The last thing I want is to embarrass him by catching his eye, so I pretend to be looking out of the window to check our progress. But for a brief moment in the mirror of the glass our eyes meet and something flickers between us.

Then our gazes separate, and pass through the grubby glass, and as the train clatters south towards a terminus neither of us has much cause to be impatient to reach, we sit there, twinned in regret, staring at the moving landscape, he seeing all his life rushing madly towards him, and me seeing mine drifting slowly away. ●

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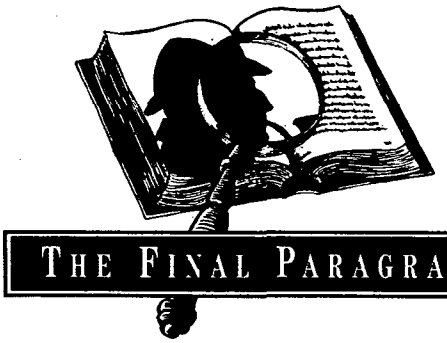

THE CABIN KILLER

by Henry Slesar

There weren't many major crimes in Pinetree Mountain, and Sheriff Brawley liked it that way. But when he saw the body of the pretty young woman, his kindly blue eyes turned to steel.

His deputy, Stan, took the static-filled call at 2:15 P.M. that summoned them to the Miles place on Moccasin Road. The reason for the static became clear when they arrived five minutes later and saw Peter Miles standing alongside a red Jaguar, holding a cellular phone in one hand, a Scotch on the rocks in the other.

Even though the Miles family lost most of their money, they still kept a hunting lodge, and Brawley kept up with their affairs. He knew that Peter, the most frequent visitor to the cabin, was about to marry the daughter of a beer baron, a happy ending for an impoverished playboy.

"In here," Peter said. He led them to a door that had been forcibly opened, the knob hammered off. Inside, he pointed to the open bedroom door and finished his drink in a gulp.

The victim was no more than twenty, beautiful even in death. The cause of death was obvious. The hunting knife had been buried deep in her chest.

Stan's knees went liquid. Brawley sent him out to look around the area, and then asked Peter the obvious question.

"No!" he answered fervently. "I didn't know her! I saw her at the Moosehead Inn once or twice, serving drinks, but all I ever said to her was, 'Another Scotch, please!'"

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"Let me introduce you," Brawley said drily. "Her name's Alma Wilson. Been working at the Moosehead about a year."

Peter shuddered. "I didn't even know she was in the bedroom when I arrived."

"When was that?"

"Only ten minutes ago! I found it open, but it's always broken into . . . The place has been shut up all winter, so there were things to do. I switched on the electricity, opened the windows to air the place out. I had a bottle in my car, and God knows I needed a drink when I saw . . . this. I called the police at once."

There was a commotion at the door. Stan was pushing two men ahead of him, one holding a shotgun with a dented butt, one with a loaded tool belt.

"Found these guys outside, Sheriff! Josh Morton and Gary Logan!"

"Hello, Josh," Brawley said to the bearded young man. "How's the hunting today?"

Josh Morton scowled, aware that the season hadn't begun. "Just target shooting, Sheriff. Ain't killed nothing."

"And how about you, Gary? Driving that new pickup . . . Wouldn't be picking up girls, by any chance?"

The second man looked at his muddy boots. "Just delivering some firewood, that's all."

"I want you fellas to take a look at something in the bedroom. Hold on to your breakfast."

Sheriff Brawley didn't know which one said the name first.

"Alma Wilson!"

"You've seen Alma plenty of times. You two are always hanging out at the Moosehead, aren't you?"

Josh Morton gulped: "Where else can you go in this town?"

"In fact, Alma was one of the big attractions. Some of the customers even dated her. Didn't you, Josh?"

"Couple of times. When she ditched her old boyfriend." He looked slyly at the man beside him.

"She didn't ditch me!" Gary Logan shouted. "I didn't want no part of Alma Wilson! She went out with every guy in town!"

By the time the coroner arrived, Sheriff Brawley had finished a thorough search. It would have discouraged a cop of lesser intuition. Except for a patch of dry mud in the living room, everything was clean and tidy, the kitchen spotless, the cupboards and closets bare, the fireplace filled with unburned birch logs.

But Brawley knew he had the murderer just the same.

Who was the murderer, and what clue gave him away? Read The Final Paragraph on Page 142.

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AFTER DUE REFLECTION

by Mary Jane Maffini

Canadian author Mary Jane Maffini, winner of the prestigious Arthur Ellis Award for her short fiction, is also a published novelist whose first Camilla MacPhee mystery was released by Napoleon Publishing/RendezVous Press of Toronto in 1999. Ms. Maffini's work ranges from the wildly comic, as in her first story for *EQMM* ("But the Corpse Can't Laugh" 4/99), to the darkly poignant, as in this new tale.

It hasn't always been this way. There was a time when I too would catch the attention of handsome young men, just like the women who swish past me on the way to the bank. A fleet blooming season when I walked with my nose in the air, my hips swinging in that will-she won't-she way. When I was confidently possessed of a slender neck and firm knees.

I recollect young men staring through the ficus branches in restaurants, turning to face me on escalators, revealing smiles of courage and hope. In windows and mirrors I would spot my bright and glorious reflection and glance away coyly. I would observe myself in shiny marble buildings and for an instant wonder who I could be. But that was then.

Probably it would have been better if I'd never been beautiful at all.

These days the young men are the worst. Their glances slide from my face as if I were covered with stale grease, leaving behind a streak of disappointment. I can feel them thinking, another old one, waste of air.

The young women are nearly as bad. They look straight through me. I am not a competitor and not worth their time.

The older women next. Swathed in artifice themselves, they check hair, hemline, the quality of double stitching, the shape of heels. Then they look away smothering small smiles, patting their fresh tints, straightening their cashmere jackets. Trailing *L'Air du temps*.

The old men hang in longer than anyone gives them credit for. At least the ones in bad suits and walking shoes do. Always hop-

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ing for a glimpse of life. A flirtation as a small reward. Perhaps they're fighting their own invisibility. Who knows? Who cares.

Now I thank God for small children or no creature would see me at all. You can count on the children. They never know when someone is going to be a good source of tasty chocolate chip cookies.

But I no longer even see myself.

I cannot go out. Only in my own home am I tangible, a fleeting sweep in the mirror in the hallway, a shade on the enamel finish of the refrigerator. I reflect, therefore I must be.

My hands shimmer on the surface of the copper canisters, in the small silver salt salvers, in the polished faucets in the bath. My home, a place where I exist and shine.

But what will happen to me?

It is the day of reckoning. I have in my hand the letter from the bank. I understand now the meaning of the word *demand* in demand loan. All I need is time, and I must match their demand with a plea. The money is on its way. Surely receivables must count for something.

The letter is signed by Mr. Sangster. I remember him. He showed not a ray of goodwill when I arranged the loan. He will not have been surprised by my default. I do not look forward to meeting him again.

In mental preparation I have two pots of Earl Grey. I stare at myself in the sheen of the rose teapot, inhaling the scent of bergamot, fixing on my image—blurry, pinkish, insubstantial. Lusterware is not the ideal medium for demonstrating one's carnate essence.

I do my best to materialize. Clothing should help. I discover that I own nothing that is not a variant of the color of dust. Why have I bought these garments? They will not advance my visibility one bit. Why am I fussing about my wardrobe? Well, anything to take my mind off the letter.

Of course, it is too late.

Crimson, tomato, plum, nectarine, cherry, carmine, rose, maroon, vermilion, cerise, ruby, scarlet, flame. The dress with a thousand dancing shades of red flickers at me from the window of the boutique, a shop so expensive I have never let myself even peek at it before. But I am sheltering under the wide green awning, shielding myself from the blasting rain that has turned my dusty all-purpose suit to mud. Shivering. How appropriate this weather. Perfect for one's last trip to the bank.

Whose heart is beating loudly in that miraculous dress?

Is it a mistake to stop and buy it? Surely. Surely. All I need is a raincoat, something safe in barely-there beige. Yet I find myself in

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the changing room, wearing the fiery dress, find myself writing the check that will push me well into my delicate overdraft, find myself purchasing not a neutral raincoat but a capacious umbrella designed to keep the dress from harm.

My mud-suit now resides in the trash at the boutique.

I am late. The dress blooms so beautifully but the fabric traps my anxious sweat against my body. The scent of my panic grows.

The reception area is curved, smooth, flat, deep aubergine, devoid of light. The receptionist has been carefully chosen to complement it. There is nothing to indicate her name. I think it must be Miss Princess. She is as cold as the marble counter. Her fingernails are royal purple. Her eyes emit not a single prick of light. Although I fill in this detail, because she does not look at me. It would take more than a red dress to get her attention.

Although the purple nails tap the counter irritably, she does not even raise her head from . . . is that a crossword puzzle? Silly me, no, it is a magazine. She is reading an article on thighs of steel in only ten days.

I give Miss Princess my name. I am sorry to be late. I tell her I have an appointment with Mr. Sangster. I do not mention that it is in connection with a demand loan for which I am in arrears. I do not tell the tediously sad story of my severance package after thirty years with the insurance company. Claims administration, always where they cut the overhead after a merger. When the going gets tough, they say. If life hands you lemons. Opportunity knocks. I do not bore her with the details of my post-retirement business and its outcome.

She might sneer, "Flowers by Fayellen? Do you not know that to succeed you must be visible and, more than that, you must leave the house? Someone has to pay for all those blooms. And how foolish of you to use your home as collateral."

No. I do not refer to the white rectangle of shame within my purse.

"Take a seat," Miss Princess says. "Mr. Sangster will be with you shortly."

I sit shakily. I examine the words, "Mr. Sangster will be with you *shortly,*" in all their dark, flat danger. With you shortly.

Everyone in the waiting area is concentrating on something, a newspaper, a brochure, a file. No one is staring at a letter like mine, but that is natural. If they have letters, they are hidden. I listen to my umbrella drip on the tray in the corner.

A young mother and her daughter arrive and sit two places from me. The mother is sleek with black hair and long legs in hose the color of nightshade, the child is plain and scrawny, a triumph of recessive genes. The mother reaches for *Toronto Life.*

I smile at the child. Apparently, she alone can see the red dress.

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Her eyes widen. "Are you a stranger?"

I have never been asked this. It makes me think.

"I suppose I am."

"You mean, yes?"

"Yes."

She is intrigued but she scurries to the far side of her mother and snuggles in. Her mother does not lose her place in the magazine.

I do not want to be a stranger. A stranger tending towards invisibility, the very worst kind.

From time to time people rise, as their names are called, and walk with hope or despair to the offices in the back. My name is not called.

"I have to go to the bathroom, Mummy."

I turn away and stare at the prints on the wall, the gloomy greens and browns unrelieved by the matte finish of the glass. You would never find yourself in them.

"Mummeee."

The mother slaps down *Toronto Life.* She walks quickly to reception with the child running to catch her. Miss Princess gestures toward the corridor. She follows the child's mother with her eyes and touches her own silky hair with those royal nails.

The child gallops to catch up.

Perhaps it is the small surge of adrenaline that comes from anger that sends me back to Miss Princess at the reception desk.

"How long?" I croak.

"Pardon me?"

It takes an effort to keep my vocal passages open.

"How long will it be until I meet with Mr. Sangster?"

"You have to sign in. Your name?"

"I have already given it to you." I point to my name on the list. "Quite far ahead of other people who have already been called."

She shrugs without looking up. She is still reading the magazine. Well, she's not exactly reading. Really she is looking at women in Lycra holding weights. They are all smiling. Perhaps she will learn to smile by reading such magazines. But I wouldn't bet on it.

"How long will it be?" I am tired and badly needing to get home to catch my soul in the beveled glass of the French doors.

She looks up and blinks at me. "What?"

"How long will it take until Mr. Sangster is free? I can't wait forever."

She frowns. It has not occurred to her that I can't wait forever.

"I don't believe he's back from lunch yet."

I am defeated by her vacant gaze.

I sit again and watch the others, one by one, pass through the doors and out again into the sunlight. Not one of them is in tears or looks like they've had a shock. The men swagger, the women walk with new pride.

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The child and her mother return, smelling of soap.

The two pots of Earl Grey begin to take their revenge. I would like to have had my lunch, as Mr. Sangster has been able to. And to go to the ladies' room. Not a bad idea; public facilities, for all their evil promise of Hepatitis B and worse, are not without chrome fittings.

But I don't want to lose my turn. On the other hand, Mr. Sangster, if Miss Princess is to be believed, is still at lunch.

A cocky young man with square shoulders and gelled hair strides through the front door and fingers the middle button on his suit jacket. It looks like an ordinary suit but it is carrying the hidden colors of ultramarine and cobalt. And it is dry. Of course. He drapes his raincoat on the rack as if it was there just for him. A simple action but every eye watches him. This is how a raincoat should be hung. Casually. Without stress.

Even Miss Princess sees him. *It won't be long.* Ah.

He sits and lets his gaze linger on her. He is not expecting a no. He wouldn't know what to do with one, he does not have a demand note in his ultramarine pocket. He tosses an appreciative grin at the child's mother. She stretches her long nightshade legs slightly while pretending not to lose her place in *Toronto Life.* The child stares at him. I want to scream: Now that is a stranger, a real stranger.

Of course, he is unaware of me.

I find myself shifting on the seat, squirming, the message that it's time to go is starting to interfere with my thoughts. I have read all the magazines. In desperation, I reread the letters in *Time.*

Miss Princess calls the young man's name. She flicks her hair over her shoulder as he struts by into the secret office areas. Am I the only one waiting for redemption?

I look around the room. Every single person has come after me. The woman and child have been waiting quite awhile. I think the young man did not wait long enough. Of course he didn't. He is everything that takes from the invisible people like me. I feel my fingernails digging into my palms.

The room has changed again, the third time. At least.

The woman and the child, my last companions in oblivion, are waved through the door.

The pressure in my bladder has become a roaring in my ears. I stand and move painfully towards the facilities. I expect to make sloshing noises. If you can't be seen, can you still be heard?

Going to the ladies' room turns out to be an excellent idea. I cannot bring myself to look in the mirror, but I catch a glimpse of hair in the chrome paper dispenser. There is a fiery flash of my image in the forced-air hand dryer, distorted, oddly strong and muscled. I laugh out loud. As if I could have strength! Even the high-gloss

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white paint on the walls picks up a firmish shadow of me, and that's a first. I appear, therefore I am. Good news all round.

I give my hands one last flick for good luck and move back into the corridor. The rear offices of the bank are filled with soft, dull surfaces, showing no one. The baffles marking off each cubicle are deep eggplant, the color of corruption, suitable for the mottled skin of a corpse. Appropriate for this land of dead dreams.

But where am I? I stop for a second, confused about the direction. Left? Right? Straight ahead?

It is not like me to go straight ahead.

Right turns out to be wrong as it sends me down a corridor with glass-fronted offices. My heart is pumping. I must get out of there before I anger Miss Princess and am forced to wait until tomorrow when it will be too late altogether.

Will I ever get the smell of sweat out of my red dress?

I am dizzy with panic, breathing raggedly, wheeling right, jerking left. What if left is wrong too?

The young man with the gelled hair and square shoulders whips out of an office and struts past me. I do not imprint on his retina, I am sure of that. He heads into the men's room. He is frowning. I cannot imagine why. Still, his image will show in the mirror all right.

Wait. The office he has left says T. Sangster. A plaque on the wall next to the window. How can that be? Mr. Sangster is there. Behind a desk. Not eating lunch. Just there. Immersed in paperwork. Proud and smirking as he fills out the papers for the winners and losers. A man born to say no.

I find myself moving straight ahead until I am framed by his door.

He doesn't even see me.

Hear me then. "Mr. Sangster."

"What is it?"

I don't even rate a polite inquiry. I am of no significance, the nonentity that received a summons from the great Mr. Sangster to anticipate my own financial funeral while he dawdled with the young man and left me to sit in a puddle of pee.

He has turned back to his work. The pinch around his mouth, the raised eyebrow indicate annoyance. Perhaps I am intended to apologize and vanish all at the same time.

"I was sent in," I say, inclining my head back toward Miss Princess, who has it coming. Not that he's looking.

I am looking, though. Really looking. The man has such power and yet he really is quite ugly, especially with that blotchy neck. He needs everything around him: metal in-baskets, leather-handled letter opener and matching stapler, all to maintain his aura. He is soft and pink and covered with freckles, like pale punctuation. No. Period. No. Period. No. Period. But does he have this power? Naked he would be quite pathetic.

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Laughable.

I laugh.

Perhaps that is a mistake.

"It is my turn." I have nothing to lose.

I step into the room. What made me do that? Was it seeing myself square and muscly looking in the chrome of the hand dryer? Perhaps.

On top of the desk is the file with my name on it. "This is me," I say. The yellow Post-it note says NO. Not even maybe.

"You'll have to wait your turn."

If only he'd looked up when he said it. But I am not worth looking up at. I do not reflect on anything in that room. Except for the tiniest flash, a pinpoint of light, on the stainless blade of the decorative letter opener.

I do not know how I came to hold it. Memory fails me there. But it is in my hand, and as I raise it, he glances up. I see myself in his dilated pupils. Crisp. Hard-edged. Red.

His hands shoot out, knocking files from the desk. Papers swirl. The blue of maybe, the gray of rejection. I cannot be distracted now. It is much too late. He turns from me—falling, falling. The crimson jet shoots from his neck, upwards, outwards, so much, so much, brilliant and quite beautiful. The arc of a crimson rainbow. I stand transfixed.

My file is still on the desk. As are several others. There is no blood on it. The blood is on the opposite wall, on the carpet, on the ceiling, almost everywhere except the desk. I take the Post-it note and crumple it. I lift the YES from the next file with the tip of a pencil and reapply it to mine.

But that is just the surface. Someone else's sad story is on the computer screen but that is not my problem.

Thirty years of claims administration may not prepare you to sell flowers but it does lead you through three generations of computers and office systems. It does teach you the logic of file organization, the standard codes, the behavior of software.

I am amazed that I have not forgotten any of it. My file is easy to retrieve. Easy to change. For once, I have no trouble finding myself.

Someone in my body floats back into the waiting room.

The child and her mother are gone. There is only Miss Princess. I would have to scream or take my clothes off to get a reaction from her.

Of course, I would never take my clothes off, not just because some of the spray of Mr. Sangster's beautiful blood has soaked through my dress and onto my skin.

So I am still invisible. That is one good thing.

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I want to shout—I can walk through walls, I can probably fly—the sky's the limit for my type; be jealous, be afraid.

Whose legs are those propelling me across the room towards reception? I lean against the marble counter. Miss Princess is sniffing a sample fragrance packet from the magazine. But all I can smell is blood.

"I have been here for more than one hour waiting for Mr. Sangster."

One plucked eyebrow arches. "I know you're there."

"But I have been waiting. My time is worth something too, you know."

"There is nothing I can do about it. You'll have to be patient," she says, managing a small but strategic yawn. I can read her thoughts. *Pushy old bag, you can just stay out here and cool your jets until I'm damn good and ready.*

The letter opener burns in my pocket like a briquette. I must get rid of it before it singes my thigh. Should I drop it into the trash?

The young man's raincoat is still hanging on the coat rack. Has he forgotten it? It seems to me as though years have passed, but it must be only minutes. No one is here except Miss Princess.

Oh, here he comes. He strides back into the reception area and gives Miss Princess the eye. He leans against the reception counter and engages her in conversation. Oh, she is lost all right.

With care I wipe clean the white-hot letter opener on the dress of many reds. But whose hand slips it into the depths of that ultramarine jacket pocket?

Lilty laughter drifts from the reception desk. Miss Princess will remember this young man forever. Everything about him. Who he was. Where he went and when. Perhaps she will sit in an open-air café and tell her friends about the closest of calls she had. Perhaps.

I sit back to wait patiently, as instructed.

If the police can see me, I am prepared to answer questions. Of course, I don't know much except how long the young man was inside the mysterious back offices.

To my surprise I am able to see my shadow on the plum carpet. There it is: firm and resolute. I am fascinated. I believe I could gaze at it for hours.

But I do not have long to wait before the screaming starts. ●

THE FINAL PARAGRAPH ***(Continued from page 133)*** "I knew you killed her, Peter, and it's my guess the young lady is pregnant. You didn't want her to spoil your marriage plans, so you invited her to the cabin and murdered her. You smashed the front door lock to make it look like a break-in. But then you made the mistake of fixing yourself a Scotch on the rocks. When I saw the ice in your glass, and the full tray of ice cubes in the refrigerator, I knew you'd been in the cabin close to an hour. It would have taken that long after turning on the electricity."

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NEXT ISSUE...

Happiness
BY JOYCE CAROL OATES

Piker's Silence
BY KEITH MILES

The Capricorn Moment
BY AMANDA CROSS

A Lazy Woman
BY PETER TURNBULL

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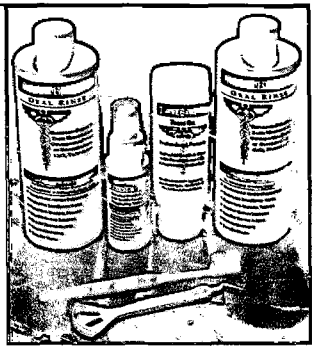
TECHNOLOGY UPDATE

Finally—a "cure" for bad breath!



For years, the cause of chronic bad breath has been misdiagnosed, but a dentist's research has led to TheraBreath™, a dramatic treatment system that works naturally and effectively.

It is estimated that over 80 million people worldwide suffer from bad breath, or halitosis. In the past, treatment has consisted of masking the odor with mouthwashes or mints, flooding the mouth with alcohol-based rinses, or the latest craze, popping pills that claim to cure the problem in the stomach. None of these treatments work, because halitosis is caused by bacteria on the back of the tongue and upper throat that produce sulfurous gases. The way to stop bad breath is to stop this process, and this is the secret behind the revolutionary TheraBreath™ system.

A scientific solution. As a dentist with a degree in bacteriology, Dr. Harold Katz has been keenly aware of the widespread nature of this problem. It was not until his daughter came to him about her halitosis, however, that he began to research the problem in earnest.

Dear Dr. Katz,

Our son has had a breath problem for years. He tried mouthwashes and mints. We took him to doctors and dentists, and even had his tonsils removed. Nothing worked, until he tried your product. I am so thankful and thrilled that you found the solution to his problem. You'll never know how much you changed his life!

—M.C., Los Angeles

His studies led him to an amazing discovery about the source of bad breath: it does not originate in the digestive system, and the food you eat has no direct effect on your breath.

Certain foods, however, contribute to the production of sulfurous gases in the back of the mouth. Mints and mouthwashes intended to mask or prevent bad breath actually worsen the condition because sugar and alcohol dry out the mouth. Many common medications for everything from high blood pressure to depression have the same drying effect, resulting in the formation of odorous gases. Mucous from post-nasal drip contains dense proteins that are full of sulfur. Some treatments for halitosis contain Sodium Lauryl Sulfate, which can cause canker sores. The only effective means of eliminating the sulfur gas production is to introduce oxygen to the bacteria, causing them to produce tasteless, odorless sulfates.

Effective, safe and natural. At his California Breath Clinic, Dr. Katz has perfected a five-step program for treating halitosis. By using these products on a regular basis, chronic halitosis sufferers can end their problem. The TheraBreath system eliminates the problem of bitter or sour taste in the mouth, improves general periodontal health and will even whiten teeth. TheraBreath has a mild spearmint flavor that tastes great and creates pleasant, neutral breath. It contains no SLS compounds, so you will not suffer from an increase in canker sores or any other side effects. These products are all-natural and simply introduce a greater amount of oxygen into the mouth's chemistry.

Try it risk-free. Try the TheraBreath System for yourself with our risk-free home trial. If you are not fully satisfied, just return it within 30 days for a full refund.

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